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# IVY LEAVES

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**FOREWORD**

We are writers. We are painters. We are graphic designers. We are poets and sculptors and essayists and photographers. But together, if we can be labeled as anything, we are truth-tellers, or at least we strive to be. It is the artist's obligation, no matter how difficult or messy it might be, to wrestle with the darkest parts of life, giving substance to nameless feelings and vague impressions, to half-conscious thoughts and glimpses of inspiration that dance at the edges of our minds like sunlight on water. But this truth-telling is a communal pursuit, accomplished if at all through participating in the lives of others from whom we gain perspective and better understand ourselves as well as each other. It is this impulse to come together—to see the world through first these eyes, then these—that exposes the compassion that is at the heart of this year's *Ivy Leaves*. Artists, it seems to us, must have compassion for humanity—both its failings and its triumphs, giving a voice to the depths of who we are as people. The artists represented here do just that. They know what a well-worn love costs, and have felt the pain of their rivers turned to hollows as the chubby boy from health class becomes more than a friend in an instant. They have glimpsed God in the knuckled back of a whale, in the face of a stranger on the London Underground, and at a birthday party in the middle of the Amazon Jungle.

In the best art, we see ourselves—our greatest fears and overwhelming joys, as well as all of the complex and incoherent emotions in between. Oftentimes, we are all like dust suspended in light as we make our way home painted more brightly than the night before, ourselves hook-stabbed as thousands of insect eyes stand between us and the exit sign to freedom. Sometimes we feel as if we've been tired from birth, and all we can do is sit by the grave of a loved one eating a favorite sandwich in the rain, waiting for them to say they were just playing. We keep asking why people give up on those they say they love. But then, we hear black bird songs like faucets, and we find ourselves in the gray clouds of a painting, and we remember that we share humanity like a grandfather and grandson share initials on a pocket watch. Sometimes, a pair of red heels can help us laugh with each other instead of at each other. With these artists, we can say if we succeed, we succeed together, and if we fail, we fail together. In this ninety-first edition of *Ivy Leaves*, we invite you to see that we are all standing on the brink of our comfort zones and the world, a voice telling us *do something with your life* as we reply yes, together, we will.



# FOR NOW

*Becca Naylor*

---

Like dust suspended  
in light, we're waiting to find  
where we will settle.



## A LOVE KEPT WARM

*Allyson Vaughan*

---

Each morning the cup of coffee he makes,  
sometimes bitter or burned, retains the taste of sweetness  
poured from a familiar hand. When he leaves room for milk or sugar,  
I smile and, leaning a hip against the counter, trace senseless shapes  
in scattered grounds and wipe my eyes. Kiss me, he says,  
or Good morning, or Go back to bed: phrases marking time.  
Yet always, the two of us, across a table, tied together by a silver thread.

Is it possible I have never forgotten the way our names sound ordained?  
Back when the space between our glances was wide enough to get lost,  
some three trillion years ago when love, or what passes for love,  
burst whole from the earth, unrecognizable and evolving—  
was it then, even then, that I saw what a well-worn love such as ours might cost?  
I have been fearful of the slow, sudden way people fall out of love  
and the days when he doesn't keep the coffee warm.



# THE SWAMP ROAD

*Grant Looper*

---

A middle-aged couple leaves their house in Apalachicola one morning, heading west towards Jacksonville. It's quiet, like before a hurricane, when the only sound is the wind through the tall dead grass—omniscient wind that knows what is to come. It's a dismal yellow-gray outside, and everything is silent on the swamp road. The branches of pine and cedar trees pulsate with the wind, and with the movement of the passing car.

Another driver meets them halfway to Jacksonville. Three empty beer cans sit in the passenger side of his Chevrolet truck. Before there is time for surprise, the cars collide. And it's scary-loud, like in a thunderstorm at night, when there's no one else at home, and the lights flicker on and off, making the house tremble.

Then all is quiet once more, and it's scary-quiet, when there is no sound except the wind through the tall, dead grass. The couple's children at home know nothing, but they look out the window and see the trees being jostled by the wind—omniscient wind that knows what has been, and what is to come.





## JUST PLAYIN'

*Mitchell Dallas Herring*

---

The last time I remember being called Baby, I was forty-one, and I heard it on my answering machine. I was sitting on the couch, watching the rain outside of the window of our living room. I didn't hear the phone ring, so he left a message. "Baby, I love you, but I don't think I love me." The roll of thunder overpowered his voice. I was too busy daydreaming that the rain wasn't going to let up and the yard would be flooded in the morning, and the puddles would make little lakes with his pickup on an island among them.

Somehow I heard the phone the second time. Maybe the rain had slacked off or maybe I sensed something. You know how you get a feeling sometimes, right before the world comes to an end? It was the sheriff. He was calling for me to come down to the station; they thought they might have found Ricky. I didn't know he was lost; he had just stepped out of the house to go down to the store to pick me up a soda and a candy bar.

"You feeling bad, Baby? Bad day at work?" He asked.

I said, "Honey, most days are lately." What did I know.

He stroked my "salt-and-pepper hair," as he called it. He used to joke that I could season a chicken breast with it. "Well, don't be bothered. I'll go get us a little something and we can talk about it. Maybe the rain will let up." He rose up off the couch and got his jacket. He reached in the pocket and pulled out a box of cigarettes. "The last pack I'll ever buy, I swear."

I came up behind him and helped him slide in one arm after another. He turned and kissed me on the forehead. "Baby, it's quiet around here, don't you think?"

I pulled back with my hands on his shoulders. "Maybe, but it's a good quiet—it's a quiet for you and me."

He pulled a smile to the corner of his face. "Maybe."

That was our last conversation before I went to the sheriff's office to identify his body.

I remember every second of that night. I knew it was Ricky before they even uncovered the body. The white blanket fit his outline about as well as our bedsheets, a one thousand thread count gift we bought ourselves for Valentine's Day just four months before. In my mind, he was going to throw the sheet down and wink at me saying, "Baby, we're just playin'." But as I stood there and waited, he didn't.

They had a church member come pick me up and drive me back home when I came out unable to hold myself up. The police and autopsy report called it a hunting accident even though it was out of season; in Cobbler, everyone knew who we were, and they knew even more that my job at the supermarket wouldn't be enough to get me by. I needed the insurance money, and a suicide wouldn't get that as successfully as a misfire. But even more than the insurance money, I needed my husband back. You see, I'm Ricky Christmas's wife. When I come to know a person, I make sure that before they know I am Clara-Lee Christmas, they know that I am Ricky Christmas's wife.

I held onto his belongings just in case he would follow through with the joke I made up in my mind. Even during his funeral I was waiting for him to come around the tree, saying, "Did you really think I would leave you, Baby?" But as the covered dishes came

in and the blessings were mentioned in passing, no loose lips let on that this was all something made-up and he was actually vacationing somewhere in Cancun.

Pastor Ryan came to my house about once a week thereafter to see how I was doing. He said he took some counseling classes before seminary, and he could help me. He said he wanted to talk to me about grief. These sessions would often leave me with my head hanging in my hands and tears pouring out of both sides. He said sometimes things like this happen and that we don't always know how or why someone becomes so sad to take their life. Before leaving, he would hand me a pamphlet about the topic we talked about, as if they were cheat sheets to the, "trial, Clara." He'd pat my hand and say, "God says we have trials to endure, and Clara, I'm sorry this is one of yours. But He also says He won't put us up against anything we can't handle. You'll make it through."

But Ricky left me alone with the questions, and I would have to fill in the answers to them myself. Some nights, especially the first night of a good rain, I would sit out in the living room where I was the night he called. I would leaf through our one giant photo album, looking at photos of when my waist was small and my dress size not in the double digits. I would remember the cologne he wore both the night we met and the day of our wedding. But then I would be confronted with his death certificate; I kept it in the back next to a picture of us on our tenth anniversary. I would be confronted with the confusion of it all, wondering what I might have done to put him in that terrible place, because no matter how many times I replayed our marriage in my mind, I couldn't find the signs. But each time, I would expect to see my name written beside the space marked "Cause of death."

I used to attend a counseling group in the city for widows from suicide. Half of the post-it notes stuck all over the inside back cover of that photo album held words of encouragement I had written down from phone calls; the ladies begged me to call them any time I got too busy thinking about things. The ladies said a couple of things along the lines of the words Pastor Ryan left with me, but it was different talking to someone coming out of the experience. We were encouraged each week to learn to let go of what we were holding onto and to "process blame." The girls spent years trying to get me to shake it off; sometimes, they said, we are so caught up in ourselves we don't see what's wrong. Maybe so. Even his friends said later on they saw the warning signs. I never did.

After his passing, when rain continued into a second day, I'd go sit out in front of Ricky's grave on a bench the church put out there for me. Slowly, each time the opportunity came, I would take something of Ricky's out there to him. I gave him a shirt, a hat, a hammer, or record, and through this I thought maybe I could let him go gradually rather than all at once. I would then sit there on the bench, an umbrella in one hand and the other outstretched to the middle, remembering where it used to be. I would even pack us our traditional lunch: a peanut butter and banana sandwich, a tradition my grandma passed down to my ma who passed it down to me. "We gotta keep our men fed," they said. So I packed two and left one beside his tombstone. Even when he's in heaven, I never stopped providing for him. Everyone told me that grief is a process, and that I needed to take my time, but even Pastor Ryan eventually stopped swinging by the house; they treated it like I had a deadline.

The ladies asked if I had thought about going on some dates.

I couldn't do that.

Most nights, I grabbed the tape from where I kept it in the end table underneath all of the grief packets Pastor Ryan gave me. I plugged it into a recorder, and I played it and rewound it and played it over and over until I fell asleep. I could see him in

my dreams. I could hear him. There, we relived each photograph, and he's in the ones people have taken of me since. Twenty years. Right beside me. "Baby, I love you, but I don't think I love me."

From the time we started dating all the way through our marriage, we had a thing about rain. We'd call in sick if the rain continued into a second day. Ricky said it was a sign from God to take an additional Sabbath, said it was a warning He might make the world right-on-over again. "But that would mean God would be breaking His promise. What about the rainbows?"

Ricky would then laugh. "Honey, no man is actually keen on always keeping his promises. Probably not even God."

Back then, we would grab our umbrellas and go walking around into the woods and down to the Pocatigo River. We sat on the marsh on a bench he put out there himself and watched the rain hit the water. It would bounce on the grass and roll off the leaves of black willow and water tupelo trees. He would eat his sandwich with one hand and hold me in the other arm. And we would sit there in the majesty of watching the creek rise, kissing between mouth-fulls, daring the world to flood. We did all of this in the spot where he proposed to me that summer of '73.

It was a warm night late May. We went camping in a tent, and I was living in the home we—I mean, I—live in now. We pitched the tent a few feet away from the water's edge, and he went fishing off to the side. I made a campfire in a pit we made with the stones in shallow parts of the river. The weather said it was supposed to rain that night.

"Ricky, I got the fire going," I yelled at him, poking some twigs into the wood. The kindling was completely used up before he got over to me, but he had three fish in hand. One was still fighting, and I could see it trying to breathe. "Poor fella," I said with my head turned sideways. "We only need two. You could let him go."

He laughed, using his free hand to hold the gut he was starting to get. "That's what I love about you, Baby. All you do is love."

He tossed the third one back into the stream as the wind started to pick up speed. I held the brim of my sun hat and the sky darkened. The nail polish on my fingers was starting to chip from putting the pit together, and I caught Ricky noticing. He smiled a bit and said I could go into the tent for the night if I wanted to, that I didn't need to work so hard. "I'll be just fine out here," I reassured him. "I wouldn't want to leave you out here all alone."

He sat down next to me, and he started to clean the fish. He used this small pocket knife to do all of the work. About halfway through the second fish, he started to explain something important to me. "This is my granddaddy's old knife," he said still scraping off the scales. "My granddaddy and grandma had the godliest relationship I have ever seen, Clara-Lee. And he used to use this knife to feed her every day. Then it was the same with my daddy and my mama. And now," he put the knife on the ground and the fish on the fire, "I want to use it to take care of you."

He walked to the river and washed off his hands. I saw him reach in his pocket and pull out that little black box. When he came back over, I knew what he was going to ask. I didn't even give the poor man the opportunity to get a word out of his mouth before I jumped up and hugged him around the neck screaming, "Yes!"

We ate our fish and found ourselves caught in the storm before we were done. We bolted into the tent, huddled around a lantern he lit, holding onto the leftovers dampened in our hands. The rain hit the roof of the tent, and I could hear it pouring all around us as we spent the night there out in the swamp. He held me close while we slept, keeping me warm even though it wasn't cold outside. We were in love, and I

wanted to be the woman that would make his grandfather proud. I still want that. I still wear the ring he had stored in his work jeans the summer of '73.

When I woke up this morning, I was still laying on the couch. I could feel something sticking into my side. I rolled over and pulled from beneath me the tape recorder, now crushed from my weight. I tried to recover the tape itself, but there wasn't nothing but ribbon, matted and distraught like a child's hair a mother neglected.

I called into work, said, "I can't today, Steve. I'm sorry," and I hung up the phone before my boss could respond. I packed our lunch: two peanut butter and banana sandwiches like my grandmother taught me. As much as I could, I ran through the rain to his pickup truck. The water level had risen to the tires, the island was gone. The truck almost didn't start, after months of sitting, left untouched since the rain lasted this long. As I drove to the graveyard, the rain was falling so hard it seemed like a fog and everything—including me—was inside of it.

When I arrived, his grave was flooded. The flowers I put down a week ago were ruined, and a large fallen branch of a tree lay on top of the bench. I grabbed my lunch, the umbrella, and the last piece of Ricky's belongings: his grandfather's pocketknife.

I waded through the flooded grass and got to the bench. I pulled the branch off, breaking a nail in the process. I sat myself down to rest, and I could feel the water rising at my feet as the downpour continued. I was barely breathing, and my arms felt like they were about to give out. I couldn't get the umbrella to open until all of my hair was wet and covered with leaves. Even then, it was broken. I grabbed the bag at my feet and pulled out our sandwiches. The water had soaked through the bottom of the lunch bag. I put one soggy sandwich in the spot next to me. I put Ricky's pocketknife on top of it. I held my own sandwich in my hand. In my mind maybe, he could come from behind the tree still. "I'm just playin', Baby." He could come around and put his hands over my eyes and surprise me.

But he didn't.



# FERRY RIDE ON THE THAMES

*Noelle Hisnanick*

---

Beyond the spires of the Tower Bridge,  
evening sunlight saturates the sky.  
Carving a path through the water,  
we talk about home.

Evening sunlight saturates the sky,  
shadows on the waves deepen.  
We talk about home,  
our thoughts spiraling off with the seagulls.

Shadows on the waves deepen,  
the sky has changed from blue to gold.  
Our thoughts spiraling off with the seagulls,  
we watch people come and go.

The sky has changed from blue to gold  
beyond the spires of the Tower Bridge.  
We watch people come and go  
as we carve a path through the water.



# RAKU KILN FIRING ON AN OCTOBER AFTERNOON

*Becca Naylor*

---

Red earth molded by dry, unskilled hands  
is now laid to rest in a willing nest of ashes,  
waiting for yesterday's news and magazine ads  
to catch fire and release a light that lashes  
out deftly with fingers reaching, grasping, gasping  
for air like a curled browning flower  
dried from drought—like our held breath lasting  
until billowing smoke ceases to tower

and the fire settles. The final unmasking  
reveals grey and white carnage that powders  
the blackened glowing masses underneath,  
and all is unveiled—the flaking, running, cracking  
of the jewel-colored glaze with its power  
to interrupt, stall, capture, and breathe.



## EAST TO WEST

Caroline Denton

---

The horn of the train rang in my ears. I was frantically digging through my Kavu bag, hoping and praying that I had just missed my wallet somehow, that maybe there was a secret compartment that not even I knew about that it had slipped into. But my hands only latched onto Chapstick and receipts from times when I did have my wallet in my possession. A part of me was ninety-five percent sure that I had stuck it in a bag with a t-shirt and had left it in the car, but it's never the higher percentage that makes your heart race. It was the five percent of doubt that was pulsing through my mind. I jumped as the shiny red Swiss-made train sounded its warning again. *I was missing everything.* I tore across the gravel, leaping over icy puddles and dodging potholes until I made it to the rock wall that did little to separate me from the rest of the world. I peered out as far as I could see to the east and then to the west. Icy peaks melted into green valleys and I watched the shadows of clouds roll into the nooks and crannies of the earth. The spacious skies were filled with top-heavy clouds that threatened to disappear into the blue—loose, fleeting, temporary. I'm sure the bite of the thirty-five degree Colorado air wasn't helping, but for a moment I could not breathe. I forgot about my wallet. I stood on the edge, overwhelmed, and wished the train could hold off on its departure just a few minutes longer.

When explorers came to Colorado with dreams to discover more of the West, their biggest obstacle was the mountains that loomed before them. Stretching over three thousand miles of land, beginning in British Columbia and ending in New Mexico, the fourteen thousand feet tall Rocky Mountains inspired the term “fourteeners.” There are fifty-three fourteeners in all, but the most famous is the one that I found myself standing on, Pikes Peak. It stands magnanimous at fourteen thousand five hundred and fifteen feet above sea level, and travel guides boast that it holds the prettiest views in America. Apparently Katharine Lee Bates agreed, because the landscape inspired her poem “America the Beautiful.”

The smell of world famous fried doughnuts clung to my clothes and I pressed my hands against my cheeks to warm my face. There was no end to the world in front of me, and my heart raced and my head felt dizzy. At over fourteen thousand feet, the human body has access to forty percent less oxygen than at sea level. With no time to acclimate to the new oxygen levels, my body launched into over drive to compensate. I suffered from severe lack of oxygen and panic from the loss of my wallet, but as I stood there, it was not the elevation that rendered me breathless.

I craned my neck and scanned the landscape, trying to see what Bates had seen one hundred and twenty-three years ago. The tan rocky top of Pikes Peak made way to balding peaks of once fully green mountains. In between the green bases of the mountains nestled lakes, and beyond that, the foothills took on a shade of blue that faded into the hazy distance. They told us we could see all the way to Kansas from here. A song began playing in my head.

“As far as the east is from the west, that's how far he has removed our transgressions from us. Praise the Lord, oh my soul, praise the Lord.”

And yet another, “Jesus, can You show me just how far the east is from the west ‘cause I can’t bear to see the man I’ve been come rising up in me again. In the arms of Your mercy I find rest ‘cause You know just how far the east is from the west, from one scarred hand to the other.”

I’ve sung these songs in church hundreds of times, but it is very rare that anyone gets the opportunity to see a physical example of just how far the east is from the west. I couldn’t see the ends of the world, but in a way, I felt like I could see forever.

As I looked out over that rolling landscape I could not see people. I did not know all of the problems that those individuals deal with every day. I did not feel their hurt, I did not rejoice in their happiness. I didn’t know any of them. I saw a train track that carved through prickly mountains and wound around smooth lakes. I saw the occasional bird peck at the ground and a Yellow Bellied Whistling Marmot disappear into a log. On that day, God placed me on Pikes Peak, standing on the edge of my comfort zone, chilled and panicking, when stretched out before me was a picture of God saying “Here I am.” I’d like to say I had a change of heart, and that my life was drastically changed, but I still struggle every day with my forgetfulness. I forget how much God has done for me. I forget that I am God’s child, and that I am loved. I forget that God tells me I am worth it.

The last call for the Cog Railway train sounded again, and if I missed it I would be stranded for the better half of the day, unless I wanted to follow the footsteps of the explorers and attempt to walk back. Since that option included certain death, I wrapped my arms around myself and stepped back from the stone wall. I trudged through the soggy gray ground and slid into a glossy black bench towards the back of the train beside a window. I peered down and out and side-to-side. In my mind, I could envision someone stealing my identity at that very second, and spending the rest of my hard earned wages at a Dollar General in Somewhere, USA, but I concentrated on avoiding sliding out of the slanting bench into the unsuspecting stranger’s lap in front of me. My head jerked backwards, and the train began its slow descent into a land with plenty of oxygen.





## ODE TO THE LONDON UNDERGROUND

*Angel Hisnanick*

---

Waves of people wearing business suits  
and tennis shoes surge through turnstiles  
to the never-ending escalator  
where they will pause, single file,

following wherever the map—  
that intricate web of colored lines—  
tells them to go. Tourists with suitcases  
seem to drown in the surging tide.

The throngs arrive at the platform,  
“mind the gap” on repeat,  
a constant reminder of the dangers  
that wait right beyond their feet.

A girl in a dirty sweatshirt  
sleeps on a metal bench nearby,  
while a CEO checks his watch  
and lets out an impatient sigh.

From the darkness of the tunnel  
a distant whistle calls,  
and the past flits like a shadow  
across the white-tile walls.

It seems the past has paused here,  
lingered in this place; I hear the train, the echoed cry  
of war-ravaged people seeking shelter  
from a death-threatening sky.

Yet, a few signs of the present are in sight—  
the gallery of West End posters, the silver train cars,  
and the florescent lights that shine  
above me like artificial stars.



# SUNSHINE STATE

*Micah Peek*

---

Caught up in the ecstasy of the Florida sun, I tore up the neighborhood sidewalk with my plastic Fisher Price tricycle. I offered baby babble praise to the bewildering Spirit of the world before me, leaving my mouth open and vulnerable to any and all elements. In that moment of sheer mystic wonder, a pair of translucent wings jetted into my gaping piehole. Six grotesque legs grasped my tongue like a child would cling to his mother's thigh. I could feel every one of those little alien insect hairs brushing my tongue buds, the wings pressing against the roof of my baby-toothed mouth. With terror in my heart and a wasp on my tongue, I dared not close my lips upon that winged fiend. What was once an incoherent wonder-hymn now was a nightmare-dirge for what was surely to be the end of me. My panic song continued for what felt like a lifetime, as the wasp shuffled around my mouth, taking in the view of my molars. The sound of my voice must have worn the wasp thin, because I felt his grip loosen, and his wings take flight. And with all the natural ease of flying in, the creature flew out into the blue of that Sunshine State sky.



# ENTOMOPHOBIA

*Shelby Swing*

---

It's sticky in the bug museum.  
 Insects, dimly lit, sit in square glass boxes  
 all around you and want to crawl down your shirt,  
 or in your hair on your face or your neck.  
 You turn around—ants. Fire,  
 carpenter, amber-colored pharaoh and bullet;  
 beetles—stag and weevil—and through the door,  
 a humid room of fluttering butterflies  
 that you don't want landing on you,

certainly not. Arms clenched tight,  
 eyes squinting slits, colored wings blaze  
 in every direction. Spiked leaves paw and scratch  
 at your cheeks and clothes. Every bud  
 arrays six legs, two wings, no more  
 or less, a full harvest of insects  
 eerily silent and fluid, attacking unannounced  
 the way nightmares do.

Those arachnids in the next room over:  
 humongous, hairy brown spiders  
 with bowed legs and round thoraxes  
 much larger than they should be.  
 Eight eyes see eight of you.  
 A bright red glow,  
 the exit sign, hangs just beyond their case.



# MOMENT

*Rachel Lambert*

---

I want to get lost on the side of a mountain with you—  
to lay a blanket  
on a layer of dead leaves,  
under a canopy of bare trees

to be like Adam and Eve before The Fall—  
unaware  
that there could be anything other than this  
at all



# AUTOPSY

*Becca Naylor*

---

You cut a valley in me,  
the blade a discourse,  
revealing lungs veins ribs  
and rivers turned to hollows.



# A YELLOW DOOR

*Allyson Vaughan*

---

All the plants in the garden were dead. Marion hadn't the time as of late to keep up with the state of the roses. There were other parts of the house that commanded her attention. Just the day before, the leaking faucet under the sink cried to be fixed. And the day before that the dryer asked, in its rumbling, to be adjusted. Today was not the day for the garden; today, Marion had decided to paint the front door. She sat now with it open, straddling weather strip with one leg outside and another inside. In her hand, a brush sliding up, down, up, down. The paint was yellow, and the day was fine. Without too much sun or too much breeze, the sun wasn't hot enough to make the back of her neck sweat. It was only warm enough that she wore a sleeveless shirt underneath her overalls. She wiped a hand down the front, leaving a streak of yellow paint. Her lips twitched into a half formed smile when she looked down at it, then at the door. Marion always wanted a yellow front door. Today she would have it.

The wind blew strands of her hair, pulling them out from her headband, across her face. She pushed them back with the side of her hand, careful not to get paint on her cheek. The workmen were in the yard, sawing off the limbs of an oak tree that threatened the power lines. The smell of sawed wood, musky but sweet, floated towards her. She breathed in, listening to the Spanish rolling of the workmen's tongues as they spoke. They'd been working since early morning, and she'd already grown used to them. Occasionally, they looked up at her painting her front door and spoke to each other. Marion didn't know what they said, it could have been anything, but she smiled all the same.

She reached up from the floor to paint the uppermost part of the door, but she could reach only halfway. Eventually she would have to stand to reach the top. For now she wanted to take her time. There was no rush, she thought. She could finish tomorrow or next week if she felt like it.

Her decision to paint the door came before the workmen arrived and without much thought. That morning, she woke before her alarm, like she'd come to do. It was the sound of nothing that woke her. No birds calling, no rain, no breathing coming from the empty pillow next to hers. She slept far away from John's side, even though his smell was gone. The mattress still felt like him. It was John who'd made all the noise. The soft snores in the evening and the boiling sound of his voice in the day. Sometimes she could still hear it. She heard it when she drove to buy the paint. What do you need to paint the door for? You're a sad woman, Marion. A sad woman. She was back before the workmen arrived. She thought it would be a good day when she popped the lid off the paint with a screwdriver. "A good day for a yellow door," she said, repeating her thoughts to herself. A small limb fell from the tree. The chainsaw stopped only long enough to move to the next one.

Marion settled into a rhythm with her brush, humming a song she could hear only in her head over the sawing. After a moment, she realized she was humming their wedding song. The song they'd played again at his funeral. She thought of John. He'd hated yellow doors, misplaced ties, and her slow responses when he asked her questions.

But he'd loved days like this one, she thought. Days with enough clear sky and sun to see each glint of broken glass on the side of the road. This would've been a day he left her to play golf. Marion turned her head to see back into the house. Leaning against the staircase were his golf clubs, dead for three months and gathering dust. She got up to pull a club out of the bag. The dust moved and she waved it away. Club in hand, she fumbled through the pockets until she found several loose golf balls. Taking three, she sat them down in a line not far from the front door. John would scream she was a thoughtless woman whenever she tried to move the clubs out of the walkway. "I've told you not to touch my things," he said.

"I just meant to get them out of the way."

"Try staying out of their way. Don't move my things," he would have said, and pop her on the back of the head. The sound would echo with the pain. She could still feel his hand hovering behind her, then the contact of it against the back of her skull. She swung at the first ball. It sailed out of the door and landed in the road, rolling into the gutter. Then she hit another. It flew farther, landing in the grass of the Henderson's yard. Kelly Henderson had sat with her in the waiting room for two days after John collapsed on their front lawn. Kelly patted her hand and asked small questions about his condition. A man's condition is always the same when he's rotting from the inside, Marion thought. He's dying. Sometimes Kelly disappeared to cry away from Marion's sight. Marion hit the third ball, thinking about the rot inside him, Kelly Henderson, and the thirty-four years of his palm on the back of her head. The third ball went with the wind, hitting the sleeping hood of Kelly's Volvo. "Good shot," she said, sliding the club back into the bag. Marion stood by it a moment before she brought it onto the front porch with her. Then she sat back down to paint and every so often she glanced up at it.

John would've corrected her swing or told her to find something more suitable for her abilities. He told her as much one night two years ago, when she'd been in a production of *Hamlet* at the community theatre. Marion starred as Gertrude, although she'd wished to be young enough to play Ophelia. "You're not cut out for a lot of things, but you're good at what you're capable of," he said. "I think acting might not be best for you."

"I like to act," she said. They turned onto their street.

"You like to, but that doesn't mean you should. Kelly is an actress. Do you remember the play she did in High School? What was it? The one about the Russian woman."

"Anna Karenina. Mrs. Forbes turned it into a play herself. I was understudy," she said.

He snapped his fingers and nodded. "That's it, but you see, you were the understudy. You see what I mean? It's not that you're bad at it, you could just be better. Ask Kelly, she'll tell you."

Marion said that she would, but never did. Her brush hit the door a bit harder, splashing paint onto her leg. She was cursing herself when a familiar car pulled up by her mailbox. Marion shook her head, laughing low in her throat, while Gemma got out and walked up the front steps. Gemma lived two blocks over and often brought Marion her company. Gemma's husband died three years ago and she'd been wearing her hair long, in a braid down her back since. It hung over her shoulder; the sun gave light to her greying hair and the white scar by her lip. "What on earth are you doing?" she asked.

"Painting." Marion kept a funny smile, thinking about the color yellow.

"All right," she said, and gestured at her overalls. "What are you wearing?" Gemma often wore them herself, though hers usually fit and, because she'd always worn them, no one asked her about it.

"Clothes," Marion said. The legs of her overalls were too wide. Her ankles stuck

out like a child's. "I found them at a yard sale last week."

Gemma nodded, eyebrows rising up as she moved up the final step. "Wouldn't have guessed. They look good. Now, really, why are you painting your front door? Wasn't it fine before?" She took a seat in one of the wicker chairs. The workmen lowered their chainsaws and began moving fallen limbs into their truck. "Thank goodness, I could hardly hear myself with that noise."

"I didn't mind it, and I'm just painting," Marion said, dipping the brush in paint again. "Why yellow?" Gemma leaned on her elbow to squint at the door.

Marion thought that Gemma would understand. When Bill died, she re-shingled her roof just because she'd grown to hate the sight of it. The two sat together on the front porch and felt the warm wind. Marion's brush made rough noises on the door, their breathing went along with the strokes. In, out, up, and down. You're a sad woman, Marion, a sad woman. She did not like the way his voice came to her. Marion drove it out with her own.

"John hated the color. When I asked to paint the door, he nearly made himself sick fighting about it." Marion rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. She turned to Gemma and met her gaze with a steady eye. "It's just about the same color his skin was when he died...isn't it?" she said, and a laugh escaped her. She put a hand over her mouth.

Gemma started, as if taken aback. Her lazy, brown eyes stretched wide. Gemma had been to the hospital; she'd seen it. To anyone else, the door was a sunny, pale yellow. After a bit, Gemma turned back to her. "You better not let them see you laugh about it. That's too cold, Marion."

Them, she thought, looking at the Hendersons' black front door. Marion knew Gemma meant people like the Hendersons, the same kind in every house down the street. The whole neighborhood had loved John so much, valued him for his outgoing personality and willingness to help. He donated money to the church and rebuilt houses when they burnt down. What a good man, they'd say. They'd loved him so much, she thought, if the whole town could've married him they would have. Kelly Henderson certainly might've, if Marion hadn't come along. Kelly and John knew each other long before Marion moved into the county their senior year. They'd been together until John left her for Marion. Kelly hated her for it until she found David. It was a long time ago, but a lot of people could remember that Kelly had loved him better. "I don't care what Kelly Henderson thinks about anything," she said.

"I don't know that she thinks, so much as she talks. But I came to talk to you about something." Gemma scooted to the edge of the chair and rubbed her knees. Marion kept painting the door. "I thought I should tell you before word got around. Kelly's been talking about John to people. David hasn't found out yet. I'm sorry," she said, leaning back again.

Marion put the brush down on the sheets of newspaper she'd set out. She rested her back, aching from sitting still for so long, against the doorframe. It was white, like the old door, and she wondered if she should paint it too. "You're trying to tell me Kelly and John were fumbling each other on my sheets before he died. I already knew." The workmen finished for the day and drove off, leaving a mutilated oak tree in her front yard. "I'm not blind," she said.

"I'm sorry, Marion. He was awful to you." Gemma bit her lip and rubbed her knees some more. "I wish I'd known about it before he died; I would've killed him myself," she said. Marion shook her head, knowing if Gemma could've hurt somebody for someone, it would be her. And that was all she needed.

"God got to him first." Marion let her head fall to her shoulder and laughed. "I burned the sheets when I found out. I bought some Egyptian cotton to make up for it," she said, delighted that John and Kelly hadn't had the privilege to feel the smooth fabric



against their bare bottoms. They'd cost more than John let her spend on groceries in a month. There was something to be said for good pillows and sheets. She got more out of them than he ever would have. He'd never been worth a high thread count, she thought. "Can I tell you something awful?"

"Sure. I already told you something," Gemma said.

"I'm glad John died." Marion thought she'd loved John before they got married. And loved him a little less each day after. When he died, the love she felt for him was only a passing gratitude towards him for doing it. "I won't apologize for thinking it. Things are better now, that's just how it is."

Gemma scratched the veins on her hand and nodded. "I think you are better, but are you going to do anything about Kelly? Bragging like that, like he was hers to lose," she said.

Marion shrugged. "She loved him. There isn't anything to do about that." When John got sick, his liver and stomach decayed while the rest of him lived. It took a bit for the rest to catch up. Kelly had asked to speak to him and Marion left them alone in the hospital room. She never guessed that Marion might know. And now, Marion didn't know why she'd let her near him, why she hadn't shamed her out of the waiting room. She thought John's sunken eyes had made her soft there, for a while.

Marion and John had been sitting together, her by his hospital bed, listening to the heart monitor count off. He'd taken her hand in his and she'd counted the bumps on his knuckles. When she wouldn't look at him, he shook her hand like they were just meeting. "What will you do when I'm gone?" he said, struggling to smile at her. Marion only handed him a glass of water when she noticed his lips were cracked.

"You need to drink something."

"You're so good to me," he said. He might've had a fever. "You rolled my shirt sleeves the right way. No one else could do that for me." John fell asleep after that and Marion got the doctor. The signed DNR kept him dead, but Marion couldn't stop his last words from living in her head. No one else could do that for me.

"Do you want those?" Marion asked, pointing to the set of golf clubs. "I don't play, but you might could."

Gemma got up and pulled a golf club out. She posed, like Marion had, and gazed out at an imaginary course. Then she straightened, squinting against the sun. "Are those golf balls in Kelly's yard?" she said.

"I might've practiced my swing." Marion didn't mean to grin, but Gemma grabbed her stomach in a fit. Her lips pulled back to show her gums and she dropped down onto the front step. They laughed until they tired. "If you don't want them, I'll sell them," she said.

"You don't want to keep them?" Gemma wiped her eyes and got up.

"I've got plenty of his things. Take them or leave them, I don't care," she said.

Thinking a moment, Gemma shook her head and brushed off the back of her pants. "No, I don't play. Bill might've liked them, but I'll never touch the things."

"All right, I'll sell them," she said, picking the paintbrush back up. The bottom was coated and she stood to paint the top. "I'm going to finish this today." The afternoon was almost over and she wanted it to dry through the night. No other house on the street or the next would have a yellow door. Maybe, she thought, she'd paint the whole house. Not yellow, but another color. Marion liked the idea of a blue house with a yellow door. And maybe she'd replant the garden. There were a lot of things she might do, she thought.

Gemma watched her paint a while. The breeze got cooler. "When you finish painting the door, what are you going to do?" she asked. A car went by the house, the driver craned his neck to see them until he was too far past. A dog barked on a nearby street. Marion bent to dip her brush in the paint. "Marion, what are you going to do?"

“I might do whatever I want,” she said. “I can’t pick yet.”

Marion could see Gemma nodding out of the corner of her eye. She kept staring at the yellow door. It was all finished now. Marion stood back, curling her toes under her. The whole thing looked like an unbarred window full of light. Gemma winced at it, looked almost afraid of it and walked towards the steps, stopping next to her shoulder.

“I think I will take those clubs,” she said, dragging them to her side. They banged against the steps as they went down. Once down, she twisted back to look at Marion. “I’ll come back tomorrow. We could go someplace. Get you out of the house for awhile.”

Marion nodded and said she wouldn’t mind that, but she knew her eyes still watched her. She smiled and said, “Don’t worry about me. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She didn’t turn back to her door until Gemma drove away.

What would she do? She would paint the whole house, but she didn’t think it would be today or next week. It would happen in a slow, decided moment when the house got too quiet or she felt the calm in her heart rattle. It would happen like that until one day she’d have a whole new house. Marion bent down to pick up the paint can and brush, which she wrapped in a newspaper and took inside. A drop of paint fell onto the floor and she left it.

Marion carried her things into the kitchen, where she stuck her hands under the faucet. First, she washed her hands with dish soap, watching the dried paint fall off her hands and into a stream of yellow down the drain. Then she washed the brush, rubbing at the paint with her thumb. She worked the paint out of the bristles the best she could and set it aside to dry. There was paint leftover, but she took it out back. The can beat against the side of her leg on the way there, but she didn’t hold it away from her. It counted her steps there. One, two, three, four. The shed kept most of John’s things for her. Marion didn’t look at them when she opened the door, just set the paint on the floor and turned around.

When she’d locked the shed, she stopped by her garden. Kneeling, Marion took a branch off the rose bush and snapped it. It was already dead or she might’ve felt something for it. There were marigolds long dried by the sun and a tomato plant never brought to life. Tomorrow, she decided, she’d clear it all out. For now, she wanted to go inside and pour a glass of wine. Which she did, and she took it with her back to the front porch. There she sat in a chair by the yellow door and felt the wind that kept the scent of wood and warm grass and no other sound besides it bothered the air. A smile rose on her face and widened when she tilted her head back. Another car passed by the house. Henry Smith from down the street. He craned his neck to see, like they all would. Each car, each person, wondering about the yellow door and the smiling woman next to it.



## THE DAY MY BEST FRIEND ALMOST DIED

*Jenni Harris*

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I wore a pair of light blue Toms the day my best friend almost died. It was right after he got glasses; they made his terracotta face look thinner and his hair look darker than they ever had. He said I looked different, too. I had just gotten back from a month long camping trip, but Michael and I had been friends for three years. And although we were seventeen, we were now a mile deep along our favorite railroad tracks tossing rocks into the woods. It seemed like every rock he picked up and flung hit a tree square in its trunk, chipping off a piece of bark that flew into the darkness like a crooked blackbird. We talked for hours.

When the sky turned gray, we followed the train tracks back to where I had parked my car, a small coffee shop where we had gone for drinks earlier that morning. And when I stepped into the driver's seat to take him home, I saw my shoes were stained with dirt and railroad grease. Charcoal smudged on light blue canvas.

We took a detour along the way, passing by our friend's house to see her car. We heard it had been balled up near the side of the highway last week, scratches of white and black, towed back to her driveway looking like a crumpled piece of newspaper to wait for a damage estimate. She had walked away from it unscathed, so they say, and naturally the car became some sort of relic, a step-right-up-and-see-the-metal-that-bent-by-the-hand-of-God kind of deal. At least to us. I parked in front of her empty house.

"There it is," I said.

We got out to inspect the dents and dings molded into the metal, some like fruit bruises and others like the small strips of skin that peel from chapped lips. You never know when something like that can happen.

It began to rain, two drops on my forehead and then like the world had turned upside down as little reservoirs of water began to pool inside the bowls bent out of car metal. Bowls of almost. Holding our hands above our heads to shield us from the rain, we ran back to my own car and flung the doors open, diving inside. Our wet bodies stuck to the cracked leather seats.

My shoes were soggy. The charcoal stains from the railroad tracks had bled throughout the light blue cloth, like the storm clouds that swirled outside our windows. I watched his eyes in the shadow of my car, and he was silent, and then his hands were on my face. They were supposed to be chubby like when we first met in ninth grade health class. The week we learned CPR, we knelt over mannequins, pumped on synthetic chests and blew inside of their open rubber lips, waiting for Mrs. Ratchford to puff on her whistle. And now Michael and I were touching noses, something pushing us together, crumpling us up in my little car until we were mouth to mouth with everything we could almost be. Trying to fit a lifetime of lovers in that one moment, him now leaning over me in the driver's seat and me thinking about the best friend that was becoming something else, turning gray against my lips. I pulled away from his kiss when all I could see was Mrs. Ratchford standing over us, my ears filling up with the shrill sound of her whistle. I started my car.

As I drove out of the neighborhood, I could smell my feet. They stank, the dirt

having oozed through the stained cloth of my shoes to settle between my toes. And all of a sudden, I was self-conscious in a way that I wouldn't have normally been around the former chubby boy from health class. I could feel him growing thinner in my car, his eyes darker. I almost didn't recognize him.

When I pulled into the parking lot of his apartment complex, I got out to hug him goodbye. My beige Mazda flexed like a well-oiled bicep in the post-rainstorm sunlight. Like invincibility. And maybe it would last forever, and maybe we shouldn't have thought so much about the almost. "Do you think this will wash out?" I asked him. As he walked away, I held up my shoes for him to see.



## COLD TURKEY

*Emily Schrieffer*

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Accusations mix with the smoky air,  
and I burn my finger putting out the cigarette.  
*Why do you give up on people you say you love?*  
*You sever ties as soon as you lose interest.*

And I burn my finger putting out the cigarette,  
our cigarette, shared like our harsh words.  
*You sever ties as soon as you lose interest.*  
I stomp out the embers with my sandal.

Our cigarette, shared like our harsh words.  
I drop it, flickering still, to the pavement  
and stomp out the embers with my sandal.  
*I hate smoking. I do it only with you.*

I drop it, flickering still, to the pavement.  
Accusations mix with the smoky air.  
*I hate smoking. I do it only with you.*  
*Why do you give up on people you say you love?*



# LUMIÈRE

*Taylor Henry*

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She is the lamp of the darkened world,  
waxing, waning orb of light—calm and cool silver  
on the faces of cradled mankind.  
Faithful to keep watch while they sleep,  
curious to understand the meaning of dreams,  
she is the assurance that while God is wild,  
God is not angry.  
She imitates passion and fire—  
her bold lover so glorious and golden,  
reflecting the morning beauty in a quiet, confident glow.  
Her lover's rays are necessities—for planting, growing, breathing;  
but she is the muse of lullabies,  
a mythic titan catching and holding the wonder  
of those she revolves.



## DRESSING ROOMS

*Noelle Hisnanick*

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I.

Presuming that she cared to hear about my far-flung plans for my future acting career, I told my roommate that I imagined one of the best parts of acting on Broadway would be having my own dressing room. I've always imagined, I said, that if I made it to Broadway I would keep my dressing room all to myself—my own personal haven to escape from the craziness of backstage drama. Of course, I imagine the cliché things—the mirror surrounded by round-bulb lights, big vases of flowers given to me on opening night, an assortment of high-quality makeup organized precisely on the counter, and a couple of reed diffusers filling the room with a calming lavender scent that makes me think of home.

I sit on the floor of the room, centering myself before the show, blocking out the sounds of the other actors and tech crew running up and down the stairs outside my door. This is my safe space. Separated from the smell of my castmates' perspiration, their hairspray, their shoes, their breath—I have only myself to be concerned with. Sometimes, I go down to one of the guy's dressing rooms if I'm feeling sociable. Sometimes they flirt with me, asking what my plans are for the weekend. Same as you, I say, I'll be here. They laugh, saying I don't have a life. And maybe they're right. I go back to my dressing room and try to shake off their negative energy.

I'm sorry, I said to my roommate, sometimes I imagine some weird stuff.

II.

Shortly before this, I was selling concessions for a show at the theatre where I was an intern that summer. Never would I have been in downtown Asheville at that hour of the night on my own volition. But it was a small theatre—really small—so, as the intern, I was always on-call to do just about anything. That night, I was selling cheap wine and M&Ms to a lobby filled with the rowdy bunch of people who made up the theatre's patronage—a mix of Southern aristocrats, artistically inclined college students and actors who had been in one or more of the theatre's previous shows. I was on duty at the cash register while the theatre's set designer, Steve, poured the drinks.

Good turnout tonight, I said.

Yeah, he said, there's way too many people in here.

Long day? I asked.

He nodded.

It was the initial onslaught before the show began. Everyone was trying to stock up on alcohol; if the production turned out to be a flop, they'd be too drunk to care. The lobby was packed almost wall-to-wall. I watched the show's director, Brian, mill about, welcoming the guests with nervous enthusiasm. I could see the sweat beading on his forehead as he talked with a small, fierce-looking woman, maybe in her late forties, with champagne colored hair.

Who is that? I asked.

That's Janet King, Steve said, she's an important donor. Everybody's gotta suck up to her.

Oh, I said.

A young man in a three-piece suit and sharp white glasses approached the concessions counter.

Hey, hot stuff, he said, leaning in towards Steve.

I'd seen him at the theatre before—he had acted in one of our shows earlier on in the summer.

Alex! Steve said.

I'd like a glass of Pinot and some regular M&Ms, Alex said.

Anything for you, babe, Steve replied.

He took a bottle out of the fridge behind us. I put the order into the computer and gave Alex his total. Alex handed me a ten, still looking at Steve, and then I gave him his change. The cash lay there on the counter for a moment before he picked it up.

So when are you guys having auditions for your next season? Alex asked as Steve poured his drink.

How should I know? Steve said, these people don't tell me anything. It's like they don't even know I'm here.

Alex took the drink and nodded sympathetically.

Are you thinking about auditioning? Steve said.

Oh yeah, Alex said, and I better get a part.

I'll put in a good word for you, Steve said.

Alex and Steve stood there for a moment, just staring at each other, and I got a little uncomfortable.

What are you doing after the show tonight? Steve asked.

You wouldn't want to know, Alex said.

Steve laughed.

You idiot, he said, you better go get a seat—the show is about to start.

Alex took a sip of his drink and winked exaggeratedly at Steve, then went into the auditorium.

He thinks he can get whatever he wants around here, Steve said.

He was still holding the bottle of wine. He stared at it a moment like he'd forgotten why it was there. Then he poured himself a drink. I think I've earned this, he said, for having to deal with all of these crazies.

### III.

Instead of going in to watch the show, Steve and I sat outside the theatre on the street where there was a breeze. The air conditioning in the theatre was notoriously unreliable. Steve seemed overwrought. The hand holding his drink shook a little.

Mind if I smoke? He asked.

No, I said.

I proceeded to tell him about the acting workshop class I'd had that day. It was funny so I thought it'd take his mind off of whatever it was he was so stressed about. I told him how the class had done an exercise where we all stood in a circle and had to throw a little rubber ball to each other while counting. We had to get to fifty without dropping the ball. Somehow it was an exercise in communication. If we looked each other in the eye deeply enough or something we'd be able to just keep tossing and counting without missing a beat.

Pretty weird, I said, typical workshop stuff.



Steve didn't respond. He put his cigarette up to his mouth and stared out at the street. He exhaled and a plume of pale blue smoke rose up into the summer darkness.

You okay? I asked.

I feel so unappreciated here, you know? He said.

Yeah, I know what you mean, I said.

Like, I'm not trying to be arrogant, Steve said, but I probably work harder than ninety percent of the people at this place. I was here at eight o'clock this morning trying to clean up the crap that was left out backstage from last night. And you know how much help I got? None. And then you got reviews coming out in the paper and they're like "the amazing Brian Andrews does it again!" They couldn't just put in one little thing about me? Just because I'm not the director, my name never gets in the papers. It's messed up.

I nodded and looked down at my hands.

Steve stood up.

I'm going in to get another drink, he said, you want one?

I'm fine, I said.

#### IV.

When I told my roommate about my Broadway dressing room she was sitting on the couch watching *Friends* on her laptop. If I move to New York City, I said, will you come and visit me sometimes?

#### V.

The next morning, I had to get to the theatre early to help the stage manager, Lou, unload some set pieces into a U-Haul to take them to a storage unit a few miles away. Lou was about my age and one of the people at the theatre that I enjoyed being with more—mostly because she just didn't talk as much as the rest of them.

I told her about my conversation with Steve. She remained silent the entire time, focusing her energy on carrying several large pieces of lumber into the back of the truck. It was hard work, and the morning was already hot. My shirt was soaked with sweat and I felt a little lightheaded.

Steve's a jerk, Lou said at last.

I shrugged. Lou, when she did talk, didn't sugarcoat anything. I appreciated this. I didn't know that much about her except that she lived nearby because she walked to the theatre every day. She had an interesting sense of style that I liked. Her hair was a different color every couple of weeks.

I thought you liked Steve? I said, picking up an especially unwieldy piece of lumber.

I do, Lou said, but he drives me crazy.

I tried to ease the lumber into the truck carefully. Lou came up beside me and chucked an armful in with such a crash that I had to just stare at her for a few seconds.

Be careful, I said.

She rolled her eyes and wiped her hand across her forehead.

I'm dying out here, she said.

#### VI.

I think about my Broadway dressing room a lot. I go there a lot. When I'm there, I can really relax. The air conditioning works, the place is clean, and it's all my own. Along one wall is where I keep all of my costumes for whatever show I'm in at the time.

Sparkly, gorgeous costumes that aren't going to rip halfway through the big dance number or be so itchy that I get a rash. On Broadway, I don't have to load lumber into a truck. I don't have to sell concessions and I don't have to stay after the shows to pick up trash. No, I leave through the stage door to be greeted by a crowd of people holding out playbills and posters for me to sign. I smile at them, giving most of them autographs, even allowing some to take a picture with me. A young man approaches me; he has been crying. He tells me that my performance changed his life. He says he wants to be just like me someday and asks if I would give him a hug. I do. For a moment I forget that we are surrounded by other people because I am so happy.

## VII.

The only time I had something even close to a real dressing room was when I went to a musical theatre camp in high school. It was at a pretty nice arts school and at the end of the week we got to use the auditorium for our showcase. There were two big rooms backstage—one for the girls and one for the guys. Each had a long counter with mirrors that spanned the entire length of one wall and the other wall had cubbies for costumes. My “dressing room” consisted of a piece of tape with my name on it designating me as the temporary owner of about a foot of counter space and a plastic chair.

During the showcase, I was touching up my makeup in between my numbers. A girl who had been in my jazz dance class throughout the week sat next to me, re-doing some of the curls in her hair. The air was filled with the stale smell of burning hairspray and I tried to breathe as little as possible. Her makeup and hairpins were crossing the line into my space, but I was polite and pretended like I didn't notice.

Oh my gosh! She said so suddenly that my lipstick fell out of my hand.

I just can't get my hair to curl tonight! She said. Her voice cracked and she threw the curling iron onto the counter and put a hand over her eyes. I saw her shoulders start to shake so I got up and went into the bathroom.

## VIII.

My roommate and I are taking a walk around the small pond by our apartment complex when I tell her about my conversation with Steve. It's a quiet evening. The sky is one solid golden glow behind the trees. My roommate's on her phone, texting someone. Probably her boyfriend. But I keep talking anyway. I tell her about how I feel like everyone at the theatre hates each other. I tell her that it made me feel awkward to hear Steve complaining about our director. I say that we're all just there until we can get to somewhere better. It's like a holding zone; we don't really care to invest in it. None of us really know each other and we don't really want to. Which is weird because we're supposed to be some big artistic family, right? But we're not.

So, I say, I'm glad I have you. The theatre's not really a place I have any friends. My roommate gives a slight nod and keeps looking at her phone. The golden sunlight makes her face look radiant. All at once I want to give her a hug. I imagine how she'd respond if I did such a thing—she'd probably pull back in complete horror and say something like *what the heck is wrong with you?* She's not the hugging type. She's not really the talking type either, but I like to think that she listens to me.

So I keep telling her about the conversation, about how Steve kept getting more and more to drink, how he started rambling on about how he loves growing succulents and said he would bring me a clipping sometime for me to plant. He paced around on the sidewalk while I sat on a bench, just watching. He got back on to his rant about how underappreciated he is.

You know, he said, I have good ideas, and these people are losing out because they're not willing to give me a chance. When I was in high school, I directed this version of *Hamlet* done in Kabuki style. It was totally avant-garde. We ended up touring it all around the Southeast. It was genius.

He was about to continue when we saw through the window that people were beginning to fill the lobby. It was the intermission and time for a second big rush for concessions. When we got behind the counter, Alex was there waiting.

The show's awful, he said, get me another drink.

IX.

When we did the ball-toss exercise in my acting workshop, we really got into it. We started doing what our teacher called "giving and receiving." When we'd throw the ball, we had to make sure to be completely focused and make a connection with whomever we were about to toss it to. If the ball was dropped, apparently it was the thrower's fault, not the catcher's. We were holding our breath. It was like there was nothing but that circle, nothing but that ball going back and forth. Forty-seven. Forty-eight. Forty-nine. And then, right when we were about to make it all the way to our goal of fifty, it was dropped. We all cried out in a cacophony of frustration, but our teacher quickly silenced us.

No, he said, we can't do that. If someone drops the ball, you just keep on going. It's not the fault of that one person, but of the group. If we succeed, we succeed together. If we fail, we fail together.

He tossed the ball to me. One, he said.

Two, I responded. And tossed it to someone else.

X.

Steve, you don't look too good, Alex laughed.

I think I need to get some air, Steve said.

He turned to me.

You can take over the drinks? He asked.

Sure, I said.

He went outside and Alex followed him. A line had already formed at the counter and I was taking orders as fast as I could for the next ten minutes. At one point the director, Brian, came back behind the counter.

What do you have back here? He asked, looking in the fridge.

Nothing good, I said, how's the show going?

Terrible, he said, and there's a guy from the newspaper here. The review's going to be scathing.

I wanted to say sorry.

Get yourself a drink, I said.

I took the orders of a couple more people.

You have your work cut out for you, Brian said, where's Steve? Shouldn't he be back here?

I looked outside. Alex and Steve had disappeared.

He's busy at the moment, I said.

XI.

My roommate and I have walked once around the pond and now we stand at our front door.

I forgot my keys, she says.

So I get out mine. I unlock the door and pull it open for her. She puts her phone in her pocket and looks at me.

Thanks, she says and goes inside. I follow her. As we enter the apartment, it's very quiet. I think about the sky behind the trees by the pond. Pure gold. Like the lights around the mirror in my dressing room. My Broadway dressing room that smells like lavender and feels like home.

Catch, I say, tossing my keys to my roommate. They fall at her feet and she looks at me like I'm crazy.



## LOVE AND APATHY

*Becca Naylor*

---

Settling into her old chair, he slouches  
and bares his pale throat to the ceiling;  
smooth hands droop over the wooden arms,  
and with legs outstretched, he sinks  
further into her faint scent  
of oils, bristles, and pungent thinner:  
things she loved so well—better than he.  
Hearing a flicker, a murmur to his left,  
he looks without seeing,  
missing the haunt of a memory flit by.  
Instead the cat's pawing the fern—  
another life she left behind.



# ODE TO A WILLOW TREE

*Allyson Vaughan*

---

In the shade under the willows, my brother and I lay aggrieved,  
our bellies and ears pressed into the solid, cool earth;  
we let our hot, burnt backs breathe  
like we'd been tired from birth.

From there we dozed, dreamed, deemed our days done or just begun  
while the door to the house remained closed to us,  
the windows shut with black curtains. There hung  
between us an uncomfortable hush.

And then I thought I heard my father sigh—

Mother did not call us out,  
but joined us in the shade and was daddy really, truly dead?  
No. No. No. But yes. And we stayed until the wind blew up a shout  
and in my lap lay my mother's heavy head.

The rain and pain, the grass stains on my palms,  
the songs of the birds and the willow tree blowing in the wind,  
my mother's and my brother's sobs, fury in my ears like bombs.



# KALAMAZOO

*Chase Aanenson*

---

There wasn't anything they could do to save him. When the old man collapsed in the freezer aisle, everyone just stood there and stared, dumbfounded. The next second, a handful of people rushed forward while the rest turned away, too busy with their evening shopping. I drifted somewhere in the middle, close enough to be concerned, but far enough away to not get dragged in. He looked to be in his eighties, but at that age can you really even tell? He was convulsing on his back, head propped up against the knees of a young red-headed woman. His eyes looked ready to burst, swollen and yellow as spittle flung from his lips. His clothes and face were covered with what was most likely soot, as he reeked of smoke. I could smell him from the frozen peas. Gurgled mutterings forced their way from his throat as he nearly screamed his last four words, "Sister Estela, Sister Estela." A dark stain ran down the front of his pants, creeping towards the floor. One last sputter and he was still. There is certainly no dignity in death. I stayed until the paramedics arrived. I learned they actually use a white sheet; at twenty-six, this was my first dead body. I never knew that, but when they draped it over him, the brown-yellowish stain spread through the sheet as well. So much for Hollywood. As I turned to leave, a paramedic tapped my shoulder.

"Hey man, did you see what happened?" The other paramedic was interviewing the cute redhead. He leaned casually against the economy-sized ground beef packages, clearly flexing.

"Well," I said. "I mean, I didn't actually see him fall. I just heard it and turned around. I'm pretty sure she was a hell of a lot closer than I was."

He gave a slight chuckle, not interested. "Sure, sure. Mind if I get your name and number? He doesn't have any ID, only a rosary and some loose bills, so the police might want to call for a report."

"Alex Stranger, and I really don't know how much help I'll be. I didn't know the guy at all." I gave the guy my cell and he scribbled it down without another comment and walked away. They never called.

\*

What I didn't realize then is that three years later I would marry that cute redhead, who happened to be a cashier headed for her break. I also didn't realize we would pack up and leave our hometown for Kalamazoo, Michigan, where she was accepted for a fantastic doctoral program at WMU. But seriously, Michigan? What a kicker. She's my world though, so I've got her back. I guess it wouldn't even matter if it was Antarctica, I'd still follow.

\*

"Come on, Kat. Is Kalamazoo even a real place? I'm pretty sure that was just a song." I laughed, she scowled and I ducked the sweater she threw at my head. Harassment was

always one of our best tools of communication, gestures more than words. After the old guy died, I'd noticed her every time I had gone in since, but never mentioned it. On our honeymoon she admitted the same. I'm not sure if it was some unspoken connection, but we never spoke about the man in the grocery store, not even once. We somehow made a pact without ever having to utter a word. It was just there.

"Well, we're going so I hope so." Sweater, fold, box, sweater, fold, box. She was a machine.

"And we're getting a hot tub." I looked at her eyes to watch the objections form.

"No way." She didn't look up from her folding, but I could see her smile.

"Oh come on, it's like 33 degrees there now. Do you realize the kind of snow storms they get in Kalamazoo? Just picture it. Naked, in steaming water, the flakes flying around us but never quite reaching our skin?"

"Maybe." Her cheeks reddened only slightly, but her smile widened. "We'll see."

"Yeah we will." I knocked the sweater from her hand, grabbed her by the neck and stole that kiss I'd been wanting. "Thanks in advance." I stuck my hand in her back pocket, squeezed, and ran for the bedroom door before she could return the favor. She would always chase me. She would always win.

\*

We lived in our castle of boxes for another two months, as we waited for all the details to be sorted out. One of our best strengths was that we were adaptable. It was easier than unpacking at least. Two sets of dishes, two coffee cups. We sat and ate breakfast in an empty kitchen. She ate, I had coffee. Kat was doing the crossword on her phone while I was researching Kalamazoo.

"Do you think there is a Kalamazoo Zoo?" I eyed her as she snorted before she could even laugh, which was what I was hoping for.

"Oh please, how many Kalamazoo jokes am I going to have to hear?"

"All of them. They don't have one, seriously. How can you not have a Kalamazoo Zoo? What kind of place are we going to?"

"Good rhyme." She lifted her hand for a celebratory high five. I sighed and the satisfying smack of our hands filled the empty room. "What about Sister Estela?" In that one question, the atmosphere changed completely.

"Who?" I asked instinctively, as I bought more time to process the question.

"You know who. Sister Estela." Her eyes grabbed mine, and I saw she had been thinking about this, waiting for the right time to bring it up.

"Okay, yeah, sorry I know Sister Estela, but what about her?" I knew her well enough to know where this was going, but I want to watch her get there.

"Well, that's exactly what I mean—we don't know. Why were those his last words? She must have been important to him. I guess just before we finally leave, I need to know. Closure? Would that be the right term for it? I guess I'm just curious about it. I want to know before we go. We still have a week before—"

"Stop rambling, I'm in."

\*

We guessed Sister Estela must be a nun, so the search was on. Google was useless except for a list of Catholic churches nearby. We looked at the map on the laptop that evening on the couch.

"Think she has Facebook? Can nuns even do Facebook?" She tolerated my complete ignorance and disinterest in religion, and I loved that she had faith. We were complete opposites in that regard, but it worked for us.



“Well I’m pretty sure she can.” Her fingers worked the keys. “But unless she is... Estela Gutierrez, Office Manager in California, I doubt it. And I don’t know everything about Catholicism, but I think ‘Sister’ can be a ‘nun-sister’ or a ‘sister-sister,’ I think they’re two different things, but they are both called ‘sister.’ Know what I mean?” Her eyes darted from the screen to mine as I tried to piece the concept together.

“I mean yeah, I do. It doesn’t make any sense, but I get it.” I give her a kiss on cheek. “Is this really important to you? I mean what if we can’t find her before we leave?”

“It’s important, but it’s not the end of the world. If we can’t find her before we leave, well then we know where we’ll spend our vacations.” She leaned back against my shoulder and grinned. “We’ll just start calling tomorrow and maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Aren’t they closed on Sunday?” The elbow in my ribs let me know I had started to push my luck.

\*

Turned out it was a lot harder to get a church to pick up the phone than Kat thought. Out of the twenty-three Catholic churches near Charlotte, only twelve picked up and of those twelve, only four would talk to us over the phone.

“Maybe they’re busy?” I suggested in an overly helpful voice. She threw me a look that could scare away most wild animals, but I knew she was all bark.

“Oh shut up, of course they are, but we can try again later. We still have six days.” Her determination was simultaneously endearing and infuriating.

“We’ve got five. Day six is for goodbyes.”

“Well, fine then, five. None of the churches so far have ever heard of a Sister Estela, so our chances have to be getting better.”

“Or worse. I just don’t want to see you get your hopes up and then be disappointed when it doesn’t live up to the movie in your head. Leaving your hometown isn’t easy, even at the best of times. I just don’t want to make it any harder than it has to be.” I grabbed her hand and held it as I rubbed the spot between her thumb and forefinger, her Zen spot. She closed her eyes and smiled.

“I’m fine, I swear. It’s really no big deal. I’m just curious. I want to solve the mystery.”

“Scooby Dooby Doo, where are you? We got some work to do now.” I sang as I kissed her neck, and she jabbed me in the stomach. I jumped, she laughed. “We’ll figure it out babe; we don’t need those meddlin’ kids.”

\*

Most of the churches wouldn’t help us over the phone and left us to play Connect the Dots as we traced our hometown’s bloodstream for one last adventure. I had to admit, the search had grown on me. Once we explained the situation, and gave them our story... Destined lovers, brought together somewhere between the meat counter and the frozen peas, helped along by a dying man and a mysterious nun. It was like backstage passes to the world’s most boring concert. Every single church let us search their records and talk to staff, trying to dig for information. We had agreed that she could have been a nun from the man’s childhood, so the archives might help as well. This was assuming of course that he was from around here, steep odds at best.

“Well I just got off the phone with the police. Bust. They couldn’t find any records for Johnny Doe and said it would take about three weeks to process the full request.” I had walked back into church number twenty, St. Ann’s Catholic Something.

“Dang.” The second the word left her mouth, her eyes doubled in size as she looked around to make sure she was unheard.

“Watch out for the lightning,” I whispered in her ear. “Did you find anything in the records?”

“No.” The sigh caused her chest to swell and shrink again. “We’re running out of churches.”

\*

Twenty-one became our lucky number from then on out, Saint Pete’s Catholic Church. We had our routine down by this point. Kat would call, usually getting nowhere, in which case we would drive over. Step one was to charm the receptionist, who would get us with the Head Priest, Reverend, or Shaman whoever was there. It didn’t take long for Kat to get her telling of our story perfect. I was washing the dishes from our lunch when Kat yelled.

“The eagle has landed!” She ran into the kitchen and jumped at me. I know to catch her now, but then we shattered a plate in the process. “God bless Sarah the phone girl. She said she remembers a Sister Estela from when she started working there, but she’s not there anymore. She said we could come by and talk to the priest. He’ll know more than she does.”

“A clue! Come on, Scoob.” I stuck my hand in her pocket and squeezed.

“You know very well I’d be Daphne.” She returned the squeeze twice as hard.

\*

We parked the car and walked around the block to where the church was waiting. Kat was beyond exasperated with my decision to play the theme from *The Exorcist* before we went to every church, but I’d started something as well, and I intended to finish it.

“All right, let’s go find your nun.” I opened her door and she immediately headed down the sidewalk. “Slow down! We know she’s not there anymore. It’s not like we’re going to run into her on the way there.” I was right, we didn’t.

“Fine, just put some money in the meter.” She turned to walk again.

“I live to serve, darling.” I threw some quarters in and jogged to catch up. Sarah the phone girl was nice, but clueless. Soon Father Raymond approached; his black shoes clicked and echoed a million times as he tottered into the open cavern of the church.

Kat rushed up to him to shake his hand. “Kat Stranger, thank you so much for meeting with us on such short notice, Father Raymond.” He looked like a half-blown dandelion. The tufts that curved around his head were haphazard, as if blown away by some god-sized child. “Sarah mentioned on the phone that there was once a Sister Estela here at this church? We were hoping you could maybe give us a little more information about her.” Cue Kat’s Grand Tale of Love.

“Well there was a Sister Estela here several years ago, but she has left our church.” The little priest had small, watery eyes, but a kind smile.

“Would you be able to tell us why?” Kat threw her charm into high gear with the priest. She fluttered those green eyes that were emeralds contrasted by that stack of red locks. There was no denying it, she was persuasive. “It would really mean so much to us.” She gently placed her hand on his and looked deeply into his eyes. She was a pro. He flushed and smiled wider, while his eyes were reduced to slits.

“Well, under normal circumstances we don’t divulge such private information as that, but as you have quite an interesting story I’ll tell you.” Jackpot. “Let’s at least stand somewhere a little less public if you please.”

We followed the tottering father towards a back room. Stacked chairs lined the walls, and it smelled of dust and disuse. He closed the door as he walked through.

His tufts quivered. “Well, Mrs. Stranger, to be honest, Sister Estella was excommunicated. She had a habit of, shall we say... romancing wealthier men in the church, and convincing them to part ways with large amounts of money that were intended for the church. When she was caught, she attempted to blame other members, but the Lord’s truth comes out in the end.” I held my tongue as Kat’s eyes told me to.

“Do you have any idea where we might be able to find her?”

The tufty father and I shared similar looks of shock.

“My dear, I ha—”

“I just want to drive by, see if she is still there. I promise if you help me with this we will be out of here and you will never hear from us again.” She leaned forward and gently placed her arm against his elbow. “Please,” was barely over a whisper.

“Oh, very well, but I wouldn’t try to contact her if you see her, Mrs. Stranger. The day she left our church, we believe she started a fire in our kitchen that spread to the back living quarters. As there are staff in and out all day, it was never proven.”

We followed Tufty to the typical beige file cabinets in the administration office. His ink pen scratched rapidly, and he handed the address to me instead of Kat.

“I really must be going now. God bless you both and your new life together.” We both moved to shake his hand. Kat smiled with a “God bless you” that sounded like ringing bells. I nodded and said “Father” in my lowest voice. He returned it with a knowing smile.

“Bless you both.”

\*

“This is the street. Here, hurry.” Her voice was rushed and excited as her hands drummed furiously on my thigh.

“Do I need to turn this car around?”

“You wouldn’t dare.” She was right. The neighborhood was dismal at best. It was a tie for most broken windows, and most boarded up. The road curved sharply to the left, more potholes than paving.

“If we get shot I’m blaming you and your nun obsession.” I made a show of locking doors and closing the sunroof vent. She ignored it completely.

“Twenty-five... twenty-three... twenty one! Stop, that’s the house number, 21 Monica Place!” Her hands were suddenly claws.

“But wait, where is the house?” I squinted in the fading light of the evening; it was hard to tell. The reflective letters of the crooked mail box screamed 21 in a blinding light, half-tilted towards the heavens. I turned the wheels towards the curb to reveal a fire-gutted shambles, mostly intact, but long abandoned. We both stepped out the car to stare. “Good grief.” I felt my jaw hang, I wasn’t really sure why it was important, but I knew that it was. I moved to her side as I put my arm around her. We stood in silence for a few minutes before I leaned in and whispered, “We should go, love.”

“Okay,” she said, but I could see the tears forming. Her eyes danced in the light. We waited for what seemed like a long time in front of the empty husk, encased in the beam of the headlights. I tightened my hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

“Onward, to Kalamazoo.”



## LYDIA GRACE TURBEVILLE

*Written by Tracy Spencer, Shelby Swing, and Jenni Harris*

*Photographed by Sarah Grace Kivett*

If you already know Lydia Grace Turbeville, you might think of Birkenstocks and paint-stained overalls, her passionate love for Beyoncé, and warmth. If you don't know her, give it two minutes, and you will. She'll probably hug you, insist that you watch a cute video of her two-year-old nephew, and then ask how you're doing, how you're getting along.

We met with Lydia Grace in the senior art students' sanctum: the painting annex. A small, brick house tucked behind the library, it is home to paint-splashed floors and walls. It is also where Lydia Grace works, surrounded by half-finished canvases gleaming with fresh splotches of acrylic. A native of North Carolina, she grew up coloring swirls on her mother's minivan in the mountain town of Hendersonville. However, after moving to Charlotte and beginning homeschooling, her passion for art grew, and she got the opportunity to practice her craft in a studio space. With this new chance to study various artists and their influences on their respective societies, Lydia Grace began to realize the possibilities of art—its power and its volume, and her reach as an artist, given her platform and microphone.

One of the most important themes that Lydia Grace strives to communicate in her art has to do with re-seeing the human form. Looking to Jenny Saville, a contemporary British painter, and Marina Abramović, a performance artist based in New York, Lydia Grace tries with her art to expose and elucidate the beauty of the human body in its natural light despite the socialized standards of beauty that we see celebrated all around us. Saville's use of color and rawness in rendering the human body inspires Lydia Grace to look at the human body realistically, focusing on the forms and flaws that miss the mark of traditional beauty standards. Abramović's physical interpretations of the human experience in art makes Lydia Grace question her own life and sense of identity in relation to what she creates. "If my art doesn't line up with my life, then where is the validity in it?" she asked, looking around at her own pieces. Necks, hands, shoulders, stomachs, and thighs collaged and painted bright teal, orange, purple,







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*“But every human, in some way, has this sense of beauty about them...What is more beautiful than being human?”*

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and navy fill her annex workspace. The painting that she’s currently working on, part of her Milkbath series (in which a model’s body shape is explored while submerged in a bathtub full of milk), shows kneecaps and toes peeking out from above the white liquid.

But the physical body in and of itself isn’t the only aspect of humanity that has captured Lydia Grace; rather, she remains fascinated by the societal expectations, pressures, and beliefs that define beauty standards. “We focus in on our flaws and what doesn’t meet this invisible standard. But every human, in some way, has this sense of beauty about them... What is more beautiful than being human?” She asked this question amid copious amounts of painted flesh, often the flesh of plus-sized models, a perfect representation of what society has deemed “imperfect.” But here, in this light, the human form reaches peak glorification. Careful to never sexualize the bodies she paints, she uses rich, bright colors to accentuate and make beautiful fleshly flaws. This technique then calls into question the social pressures and body image issues that run rampant through modern day culture. How could something painted this beautifully be considered ugly?

Though Lydia Grace has faced discouragement and had many question the appropriateness of her artwork, she credits the faith of her family as well as the guidance of her professors among her largest motivations, giving her the edge she needs to continue doing what she truly loves. She hopes to continue her education in art and one day be able to teach others how to see the world in a new light, a world of Beyoncé and Birkenstocks and beauty recognized any time and every time someone catches their reflection.



# LYDIA GRACE TURBEVILLE

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*two oil paintings on wood panel  
in the order in which they appear*

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**PAGES 50-53**

## **MILKBATH II**

*26 x 38 in.  
Acrylic on Wood*

## **MILKBATH III**

*26 x 32 in.  
Acrylic on Wood*



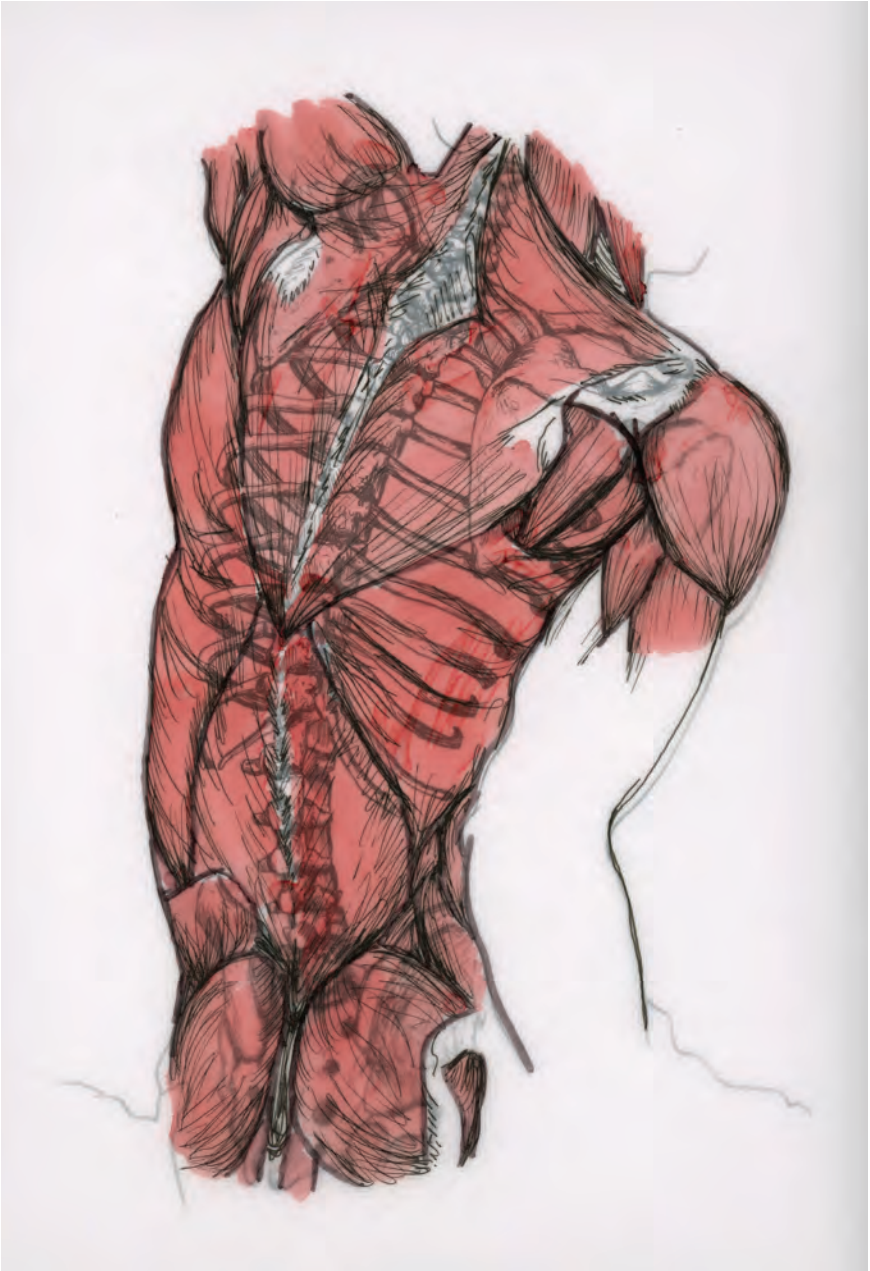




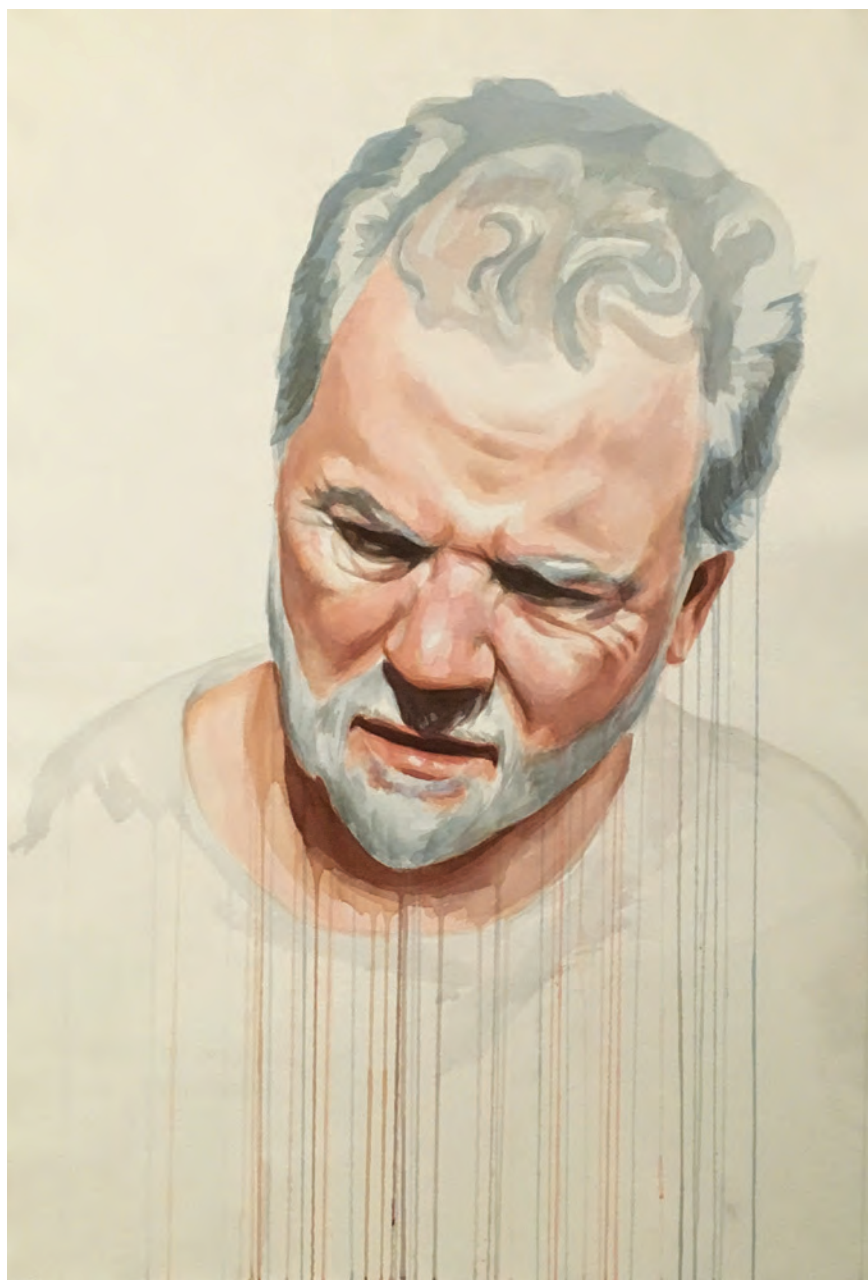








**ANATOMICAL SUITE 2**  
*ink drawing by Micah Peek*



**CONFUSION OF ABRAHAM**  
*watercolor by Amy Galloway*



**PORTRAIT OF EMILY**

*beans, lentils, rice, chickpeas, & coffee beans on panel by Cyra Bardo*



**UNTITLED**  
*oil on canvas by Abbey Benito*





**Roof 1**

*digital photography by Kayla Pellegrino*

**PORTRAIT NO. 4**

*(R) digital photography by Caroline Denton*







**LISTENING**

*oil on panel by Kendall Garner*

**GRAY INHABITED**

*(R) powdered charcoal, conte crayon and acetate on rosen paper by Abbey Benito*









**HONESTY**

*digital photography by Holly Lang*







**LIGHT 1**

*digital photography by Kayla Pellegrino*

**WHEN GOD REACHED OUT AND BROKE**

*(L) oil & alkyd on panel by Ashley Waller*



**A FAMILY**  
*ceramics by Jada Keeran*





**DANCE**

*film photography by Anna Tabor*

## ALLYSON VAUGHAN

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*Written by Shelby Swing*  
*Photographed by Sarah Grace Kivett*

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Allyson Vaughan sits curled up on a couch in her dorm lobby on a cold February afternoon, a cup of tea in hand. Her dark hair is clipped back and she's wearing long dangly earrings. She's the life of every English class; she is quick to make thoughtful points in every discussion, but also knows how to get everyone laughing. Even now, as residents clatter pots and pans in the kitchen, she talks enthusiastically over the din. Whether she's telling a story about something that happened in class or in the caf the other day, it's easy to know when she's getting to an amusing part because her smile gets wider and wider.

Since she's originally from Spartanburg, South Carolina, and spent most of her life in Boiling Springs before coming to school in Anderson, Allyson knows small towns very well. "There weren't many places to go, so I spent a lot of time reading," she says. Her hometown has provided inspiration for much of her writing. Allyson's literary heroes include authors such as Sylvia Plath and others who wrote about small towns. "I would also say J.D. Salinger—he influenced a lot of my earlier writing. I've read everything he's written. Also Flannery O'Connor. My current writing is a little bit reflective of hers." Like O'Connor, Allyson explores the mystery and manners of the South through characters who may be grotesque and humorous, but they are also, and always, relentlessly human.

Allyson started writing in elementary school, after she was forced to read a small writing assignment in front of the whole class. Her teacher declared (rather prophetically) that Allyson was going to be a writer. Allyson insisted she was going to be the next Britney Spears. In the early years of her writing career, she wrote poetry and had several poems published in a children's anthology. She took a hiatus from poetry but returned to it in high school, and began dabbling in fiction. "Novel-writing—fiction—is my favorite to do," she says with emphasis. Nevertheless, writing wasn't always in Allyson's plan. "I never realized that you can be a writer as a career, so I dabbled in a lot of other things." Only when she accepted writing as a





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*"I felt lost in a period when I wasn't writing.  
Whatever I have to do, I'm going to write."*

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livelihood did she embrace the craft as something she wanted to do for the rest of her life. When asked what her biggest obstacle has been in her journey to become a writer, Allyson responds immediately: "Opposition, for sure. Maybe it has to do with the family culture, or the Southern culture, but the first thing that people ask is 'How will you keep the lights on?'" She shrugs nonchalantly by way of reply, then adds, "I felt lost in a period when I wasn't writing. Whatever I have to do, I'm going to write."

Allyson says that above all else, her family inspires her. Her brother is all a brother should be and an academic whiz; her mother is outstanding, all support and encouragement. Maybe because of that goodness, or maybe because of the troubles they have pulled through together, in the last couple of years, Allyson has found herself writing specifically about family and place. "I always like to write characters who are forced to look at an aspect of themselves that they otherwise wouldn't look at if a certain event hadn't happened. I like to see my characters faced with tragedy, because I think people show you who they are if they're put in a situation where they can't get out." The novel she's currently writing for Senior Seminar, titled *Fragile and Hidden Things*, is her favorite work so far. She's finding her own voice, her own style, and that's exhilarating. Following graduation, Allyson plans to "jump into the deep end," writing, publishing, traveling, and facing life in a way that she never has before. "Seeking out experience," she says with a smile. I can't wait to read about it.









# ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-NINE WEEKS

*Anna Wilson*

---

One hundred seventy-nine weeks ago. That's when Instagram says the photo was taken of my friend Jordan and me sitting on the front lawn our freshman year, laughing hysterically. She was probably drawing, and I remember I was working on French homework. The pressure of the first week of classes at college had driven us to that tipsy, giggly stage where everything you say and do is funny. The front lawn was our backdrop, and it heard all of our brilliant, ignorant plans as we sat on its grass week after week writing papers about the Trinity or World War II or environmental safety or media law.

The front lawn at Anderson University is like a calling card; everywhere you turn, someone is handing it to you. It was handed to me as a prospective student on campus tours, as a freshman at summer orientation, and as a more seasoned student in convocations that reminded us of our traditions, our heritage, and our future. Basically, what I got was this: the trees are really old. Some are over a hundred years old with roots that stick out of the ground like gnawed fingers grasping, pulling to be free of the ground. One time I remember having a conversation under one of the trees. The guy stood on the ground like a normal person, but I kept stepping up on one root and then another while I talked, trying to get a little taller and avoid eye contact. Most of the trees are oaks; some have remained for decades, and some are newly planted to replace ancient ones lost to storms, but all of them have stretched and grown so that the lawn is covered by a canopy of branches, branches that are too high up for anyone to climb on them. In fact, rumor has it that campus safety—which has a little white house situated on the corner of the front lawn—probably wouldn't shoot you if you climbed the trees, but they might well call your parents.

Speaking of shooting, once, we almost had a shoot-out on the front lawn. Freshman year, a convict, with what I'm certain was a massive and terrifying record, had escaped from the AnMed hospital at night and was on the loose. The entire school went into lockdown. My roommates and I ate Nutella and pretzels with our faces pressed up against the window of our dorm overlooking the lawn. We waited with bated breath, praying that the criminal would come running across the lawn, wrists still shackled, his striped suit billowing in the wind, while the police chased him down with flashlights and dogs and yelling. We would have front row seats as the convict ran, tripped on one of the old tree's gnarly roots, and was then pinned to the ground and arrested again. That was our dream. It never happened. But many dreams do come true on Alumni Lawn, and they start the Sunday before we attend our first classes.

The lawn spans the width of the university campus and is split into two rectangular blocks. Separating it is a brick walkway, lined with globed lamps and a metal archway with "Anderson University" written in gold letters. On my first day, all of the freshmen marched in a long row under the arch, up an ancient brick walkway, and shook the president's hand. We had arrived. On either side of the walkway, stretching in all directions, was the grass, the very best part of the lawn. Anderson University grass is long and lush and, by some magic, always green. In the winter the grass is a pale evergreen but in the spring it



becomes a vibrant yellow-green and grows so fast that the landscapers are out there every other day. Sometimes they mow it in crisscrossed lines so that the lawn looks like a checkerboard. There's a foot-trodden path that slices diagonally across one side of the lawn where everyone cuts through to get to the library. We once got an email telling us to stop walking there because it was ruining the grass and the first-impression appeal of the campus. But everyone keeps doing it. I think it makes the lawn look lived in.

The lawn also has two metal benches that sit on either side of the walkway. They are each dedicated to a generous friend of the university. Sometimes, when I would come back from a dance rehearsal late at night, I would sit on one of those benches in silence for a few minutes, looking up at the moon with no one else around. Most times I would pray and tell God about all of my stress and the unfairness of life and ask what was I at school for and was I in the right major and was I ever going to find a husband and why are my roommates so dramatic and could I please not be so awkward? And I would never get any direct answers but the breeze would always whisper through the leaves and grab the ends of my hair and lift them up and swing them about my face. And I felt God's presence. On one of those benches I told a boy no, that I didn't think it would work between us, that I had my own plans and he didn't seem to fit into them. I remember the way he looked down and rolled around acorns that had fallen on the ground with his shoes. On that same bench I told the same boy yes, that I had been wrong, and we talked about our dreams and whether we liked the mountains or beach better, and I didn't want to leave that bench.

In thirteen weeks I will be graduated on the front lawn. I'll walk under the archway and down the bricks, past my professors, and into the grass where hundreds of people will be praying for seats in the shade under the canopy of branches. I'll receive my diploma on the same grass where I did my French homework, and played Frisbee, and prayed in the moonlight, and stood when a fire alarm went off in the dorm at two in the morning. The front lawn is still the same as it was four years ago, but the trees have grown a little taller, some dead branches have been cut down, and new grass has grown. The lawn may not have changed all that much, but one hundred seventy-nine weeks later, I see it differently. I get it, the calling card. I expect I'll hear it calling for a long, long time.



# THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT

*Noelle Hisnanick*

---

He saw our hollow souls  
in the eyes of a scarecrow,  
heard our unspoken fears  
in the songs of a cathedral's martyrs,  
and confronted our mortality  
in a town where ends are beginnings.

Sometimes his words were sharp tools,  
a surgeon's instruments of steel  
that healed even as they hurt—  
and sometimes they were music,  
a rhythm that played in our thoughts  
long after we had turned the page.

He was the man whose love song  
mingled with the voices of the mermaids,  
he was the unnamed guest at the party  
telling us that we are always strangers  
to one another, beginning anew  
every moment of our lives.

When the world was a wasteland  
and the night seemed without end,  
he showed us the dying streetlamp  
that signaled the coming of day.



## BAD CHEMISTRY

*Becca Naylor*

---

Open palms reach upward,  
tense arches lift off the ground,  
burning blood running—  
collapse  
cold inertia  
laid low by chilling indifference.



# A PILGRIMAGE TO THE GRAVE OF A FRIEND

Angel Hisnanick

---

*“Men must endure / Their going hence”  
—King Lear, 5.2.9-10*

A string tightens in my core  
as my footsteps jar the reverent silence.  
Within these crumbling walls  
a part of my soul lies buried.

My footsteps jar the reverent silence  
of the quiet country church.  
A part of my soul lies buried here  
with only shadows for companions.

Beneath the quiet country church  
I kneel in the vine-covered grass,  
my only companions shadows  
and a robin watching from the wall.

Kneeling in the vine-covered grass I read  
*men must endure their going hence*  
while the robin watches from the wall  
and the light begins to fade.



## CLOUDS

*Tquavious Johnson*

---

I found myself in an art gallery filled with people who, like me, were not there to see the art on the walls. We were there not only to hear poetry, to hear stories, but to read our own as well. As writers went up to the podium one by one, we leaned forward in our folding chairs, attentive, respectful. We tried to catch each word, each image of the labor done in summer or the deep yet irrational fears found in dark, damp basements. Later we clapped, congratulated each other, laughed. But I felt out of place. The sheet of paper that held my own poetry seemed to crumple under the weight of other words, better words, their words. As I made my way toward the door, I noticed, behind the podium where readers had stood, a painting: a lush, green forest blanketing mountains that looked over a blue river running through the valley. Clouds gathered over the fertile land like a fleet of warships, preparing to destroy it all. Clouds gathered like hands threatening to suffocate the land and all breathing things. In the distance, I heard the roll of thunder. In this painting, I saw the bright colors of the land and the encroaching dull color of the sky. I could hardly breathe.



# THE WATERCOLOR MAN

*Maris Mabry*

---

Knuckles,  
round and swollen, dyed  
indigo beneath the skin,  
the jaw  
a dark watercolor,  
purple, green, and puce,  
spreading like ink in a glass of milk.  
A fighter: his life a subscription  
to nights ruled by fists  
with headlines always consistent:  
a punch here,  
a knockout there.  
Somehow he always makes his way home,  
painted more brightly than the night before.



# STINGRAY

*Angel Hisnanick*

---

*After "Manatee" by Carol Frost*

fading to blue and gold on the horizon,  
smooth and cloud-speckled  
to be mistaken for thunder: how waves  
collide with the shore: alone I found  
one pierced, fisherman's hook  
in its strong right wing: blending  
with the wet grey sand, whipping  
its barbed tail: the ancient hymn  
of twilight—how we're terrified  
by strength, strength alone wanting  
no one: with stingray in mind:—  
smooth wings, arrow-tail, slick:—my trapped life,  
myself hook-stabbed: my emancipation:  
in the eyes a dark shadow a cry,  
vibrant flesh silvering as in a myth: no lovely songs.





# THE HAPPIEST GIRL THIS SIDE OF BROOKLYN

*Shelby Swing*

---

Flamboyant complaints arise from the bus stop this morning, right after the heavens open up and rain down on fresh hair-dos. The only man there, who's wearing a suit and fervently texting on his phone, begrudgingly gives up his spot of sidewalk under the glass shelter, but only after a couple of large, busty women old enough to be his mama collectively shake their heads at him. I slowly squeeze myself out from under the shelter, motioning for a young pregnant woman to take my place. She's wearing a long floral dress that buttons down the front, her protruding belly making the hem sneak halfway up her calves. I shift my weight from one foot to the other, regretting that I left my umbrella at home in my hurry to leave. An already-soaked newspaper page is bleeding at my feet on the sidewalk, but I don't even bother to pick it up to hold over my head. My hair's already damp; there's no protecting it now. Jeron doesn't care how I look, so neither should I. He used to call me "goh-juss" and his "angel," but that was a long time ago. We're past that now. I suppose we're in a different stage in our relationship.

I won't lie and say that Jeron is unlike other men, or that he's extraordinary or anything. But I love him, and that's enough. His attention to me, his teasing—that's what attracted me to him in the beginning, what made me so enraptured. He'd come sit outside my parents' house in his cousin's beat-up Buick and wait for me to come sprinting down the front steps, my father always watching from the glow of the living room window. "Hey angel, where we headed tonight?"

He'd squeeze my knee before cranking the engine. Wherever we went, we usually ended up back at Jeron's place, a shabby but somehow cozy apartment that he and his two buddies rented.

A sloshing can be heard down the street, and everybody, even those under the shelter, stretch their necks out and peer at the approaching bus. I slowly pile on behind the elderly women, their weight on each step tipping the bus a little off-kilter. Just as the last few people are climbing on, I slide into a seat in the front. Before I lived on this side of town, I never gave much thought to where I sat on the bus. Heck, I never even rode the bus, not even to school. My mama drove me. But when I started living here, it started mattering where I sat. I don't know if it's me trying to be the Rosa Parks of the twenty-first century, or if it's just my pride, or maybe those are one and the same. All I know is the more I lose pride in the things I'd once taken pride in, the more I care about my bus seat. Today I sit in the very front. I place my ratty canvas tote bag in the seat next to me.

The doors are closing now and the young pregnant girl's waddling up the steps. I try not to make eye contact with her, and dig out my crossword puzzle book I got from the Dollar Tree. The bus jerks forward and I see the girl grip the railing, still standing. She coughs a little.

"Ma'am, can I sit here?"

I know she's talking about the seat my bag is in, and I glance up into her smooth baby face. She can't be more than nineteen or twenty. When I don't respond, she repeats herself.

"Ma'am, is it fine if I sit here?"

I nod, moving my bag to the floor. She maneuvers herself into the seat, hands gripping the silver rail in front of us, knuckles white. I'm already back to my crossword, trying to find a word for eight down, when I feel her sigh. She adjusts the folds of her dress, smoothing down the fabric over her belly. For the next two blocks I can feel her glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. She doesn't say anything, though, and the only sound is the rain against the bus windows and bleeping from a handheld video game the boy behind me is playing.

Finally I give up on the crossword puzzle and glance back. She's looking at me, and gives a small smile. Meek. Bashful. And so young. Her skin is coffee-colored with two creams (as my grandmother would have said) and stretched taut across her face and neck, not a wrinkle in sight. I remember when my skin looked like that. She's still smiling, expecting me to smile back, so I do.

"Some rain we're getting, huh?" She rubs her belly, shifting in her seat.

"Mhm." I nod a little, glancing out the window at some teenagers on the curb. It's after nine in the morning and anyone not from around here would wonder why they aren't in school. I don't, though. For twelve years I've seen kids playing or smoking or up to no good when they should've been in school.

"Whatcha got there?" The girl peeks at my crossword now, counting boxes in her head.

I look down. "Just something to pass the time."

She quietly gazes at the page and I'm not sure if she heard me. Smooths her finger against her bottom lip. "Feathers." She taps the puzzle. "For eight down."

I check and sure enough, she's right. I take my pencil from behind my ear and fill in the last word, reaching a hand out at the same time to catch myself as the bus lurches forward again.

"I'm Christina." She reaches her right hand over. I smile a little and give it a shake. I knew a Christina once. A little white girl who was in my ballet class. We had a playdate one time and we practiced pirouettes in my bedroom for hours. We were inseparable during those years of ballet. Our ballet mistress, a sage, middle-aged Russian woman, used to cover my cold hands with her warm ones and look me straight in the eyes. *Do something with your life, Janiah.* Younger Christina told me that she wanted to dance for the New York Ballet Company. She was good, too, and didn't quit when I quit. I wonder what happened to her.

Older Christina and I are quiet for a minute or two, the bus stopping every few blocks to let people off and pick more up.

"When are you due?" I ask, figuring it's my turn to talk. I glance over my shoulder at the boy playing that noisy game, and a woman who must be his mama swats his hand and shushes him.

"June 8th. Only eight weeks to go." Her eyes shine with two parts excitement, one part anxiety.

"So seven months along?" She nods. "Do you know what you're having?"

"A boy. His father's so proud." Her ring finger is bare, like mine.

"I'm sure he is." I smile wider this time, genuinely. The bus is almost empty now; only an older man with a wooden cane sits in the very back, and the both of us in the front. I realize we're three stops away from my stop.

"Where you headed?" She asks suddenly. I tense, because I know where I'm headed and she'll know, too, if I tell her my stop. No one really has any other need to go to Oak View Avenue if they don't live there or if they're not going to the detention center.

I'm not sure why I get all jittery and anxious about visiting Jeron. I've done it many times, so many times I could do it in my sleep. This time is different, though. I imagine the two crisp bills in my purse, the ones I'm gonna use to buy him a nice meal and then our bus tickets home.

I tell myself there's nothing to be afraid of, nothing to be ashamed of. My man's served his time and now his punishment is over. Clean slate.

"Oak View Avenue," I finally answer, fiddling with my pencil.

"Oh, ok. You have a place over there?" Her tone slightly implies that she hopes I don't live on that side. Not for her sake, but for my own. Hunts Point area, in South Bronx, is not the side of town people flock to.

"Uh. No." Now I'm the one smoothing my clothing, as if somehow that will rub away some of the embarrassment I feel. No reason for it, just like I've been telling myself, but it's there in my chest, showing itself in my eyes, no doubt.

I clear my throat, raise my head up. "I'm going to the detention center down that way. My man's being released today." Finally. I can't help the smile that creeps onto my face. Saying it to someone makes it three times more exciting.

"No. Really? Me too!" Christina slaps her handbag down on her lap. The chilly judgment I was expecting from her doesn't come. "I'm picking my Steven up this morning. I'm so excited to see him! Haven't seen him in three weeks."

"Haven't seen mine in two months." My words hang in the air for a moment, both of us realizing what those two sentences mean: my man did something worse than hers. What she doesn't know is that this isn't the first time. There have been other mornings when I've boarded the bus with two crisp bills in my purse, happiness and anxiety and fear in my heart.

Christina grabs my forearm as we near our stop. "Will you walk in with me? I never done this before, and I'm not sure how the whole thing goes. We can figure it out together, and that way, neither one of us will be lost. I know there'll probably be a lot of paperwork, but I hope there isn't a long line. This baby's always pressing on my bladder and I'm running to the bathroom every five minutes..."

"Sure, I'll go with you. There'll be paperwork and some waiting." The words are out before I realize I've given myself away. I glance at her and see a hint of pity, but then she's looking at the floor.

"Well, I'm glad you know what you're talking about," she finally says, quietly.

I exhale, realizing I was holding my breath. "There won't be any lines." I don't want to tell her that other men serve sentences much longer than our men have served. People don't line up to come fetch their husbands or boyfriends or sons. Some of them aren't anybody's husband or boyfriend or son. A girl like Christina certainly doesn't know that, and I'm not going to be the one to enlighten her. Some things you just have to learn on your own, but eventually the hurt strengthens you.

The bus jerks to a stop and I stand, noting that the rain has finally let up. Christina takes a moment longer, both hands gripping the rails. She's on the outside seat, so I wait for her to turn around and make her way off the bus.

A pack of tall teenage boys in pants three sizes too big greets us as we stumble out onto the sidewalk. I can smell what they're smoking, all five of them with ducked heads watching the two of us. One of them eyes Christina, smoke escaping with his breath as he winks at her. I hike my bag all the way up my arm and link the same arm into Christina's before I begin propelling us down the sidewalk. I thank God I remembered to stick my pepper spray in my pant pocket this morning, the same place I keep it when my sleaze-ball of a landlord comes knocking on my door asking for the rent. I can see the massive fence that stretches around the detention center just down the street.

Right before we reach the fence, I steer Christina down a narrow street and towards a one-story building. "Oak View Avenue Detention Center Department" is on the door. The detention center looms above us, directly next to this small, adjacent building. I press the buzzer to be let in and wait. Christina is gripping my wrist.

"Please state your name and the name of the person you are here to see." A deep

female voice comes through the speaker near the door.

I press the button and lean close to the speaker, stating my name and Jeron's, before motioning Christina to do the same. It's silent for a minute, and I can't help but glance up at what I know is a video camera that's trained on us. The security of this place always makes me anxious. A loud buzzer finally goes off and I hear the locks open in the door. I shake Christina's hand off my wrist and go inside as she follows.

The inside looks like a waiting room. The woman who buzzed us in sits in a separate room behind a rectangular glass window. I lead Christina past another woman, no older than eighteen, to the receptionist, who asks us if we're here to collect. Yes, we're here to *pick up*.

"Sign in," she says without looking up. "Then fill these out." We each get handed a thin stack of papers. I take a seat and start on the first form. Name. Date of birth. Relationship to inmate. There's a contract requiring me to see that Jeron keeps parole. It's no easy responsibility.

An hour passes quickly. I finish before Christina, even with her interrupting me several times to ask about this and that, and how to fill out such and such. When I return the papers to the receptionist, she tells me what they tell me every time: it'll take a while to process the papers, and once they're processed, Jeron will be prepped for release.

I'm working on a crossword when Christina finishes her stack. She slumps against her seat and is quiet for a moment, something that I've realized is a rarity.

"He's in here for drug possession, you know." Her voice sounds tired and sore. I look over and she's looking straight ahead at the white wall on the other side of the room, her eyes glistening. "He had just started selling when he and a group of his buddies were caught. Apparently it was a pretty big bust, because his friends had been doing it for longer and selling in larger amounts. He got off easy." Tears are running down her face now. I slowly tuck away my puzzle book and wrap my arm around her. She turns her face into my shoulder.

For a moment the only sound in the room is the ceiling fan overhead, clicking with each rotation.

"My Jeron is here for assault. This time." It's hard to get my mouth around the word *assault*. It's hard to get my mind around it, too. What I believe him to be keeps getting in the way.

"Assault?" Christina snuffles.

I hand her a tissue and nod. "First offense, third degree." It's quiet again, because how do you respond to something like that?

"I'm going to marry him," Christina says, "once the baby gets here." She sits up, rubbing her cheek. "He said we could. We were going to do it earlier, but then...well, you know. He promised me that we could go find a nice dress for me to wear, not a wedding dress of course, but something nice. And we'll go to the courthouse, the three of us." She's smiling now, and I smile back, even though my stomach's in a knot and I'm hoping to God she knows that that's a fantasy.

She's not going to marry him. He'll make promises like that till the sun goes down and never give a second thought to keeping them. Trust me, I know. I know because I was once a glowing Christina, hanging my hope on Jeron's every word. Each promise he gave me was a treasure. I had a nice dress, a date chosen, and every detail ironed out down to how we'd walk hand-in-hand to the courthouse. I rub my ring finger with my thumb. Still bare.

"How'd you meet your man? Jeron?" she asks.

I nod. "We met in high school, at a party. He didn't go to my school, though, because my parents paid for me to go to St. Gabriel's." I pause, trying to weed through messy memories. "I made some mistakes back then...I'm not from this side of town. I grew up in Manhattan.

Carnegie Hill.” Christina raises her eyebrows.

“Yeah. I met Jeron, and he sort of latched on to me. He was really good-looking—could’ve had any girl at that party. He was the most attentive guy I’d ever met. That’s what made me start falling in love with him. My parents hated the whole situation, obviously. Said I was distracted. I was supposed to be finishing high school and preparing for college. Jeron said I could live with him, though. He promised to take care of me, so I ran away with him when I was seventeen.” I do some quick math in my head, arching my sore back. “That was twelve years ago. We were good for a while. We stayed in an apartment with some of his friends. I got a few odd jobs, but it was hardly enough to support the two of us. Jeron kept saying we would get our own place, but he never could seem to afford it.”

Christina is nodding. “If they’d just go and get honest jobs...but they sure aren’t gonna listen to us, are they?” My throat tightens as she laughs. “What happened to those wealthy parents of yours?”

“My parents cut me off after a while, after I refused to come home. That’s when it got really hard. I learned later that Jeron was selling drugs all that time, even before I met him. Never got caught...it would have been bad if he had.” He’d still be sitting in prison for a while longer, I think, but I don’t tell Christina. “A little while later, it was shoplifting. That was the first time I had to come pick him up, down at the county jail. Paid his bail with the last of my parents’ money. It was illegal weapon possession after that. And now this.” I woke up today with no feeling whatsoever. Numb. But now I feel like crying wouldn’t even be enough. The receptionist’s phone rings abruptly and we both jump.

“I’m sorry. I really am.” Christina rubs my arm. I don’t say anything or even look at her, because she doesn’t understand. She can’t. I wish she could. I wish she could learn from my experience, but I know she probably won’t. “Do you still love him?”

“Of course I do. Trouble just came along. I still love him. He’s just gone down a wrong path, that’s all.”

Christina seems to be satisfied with that answer. I’m not sure I am, but I have no time to think about it because an officer opens the door from the detention center just then, calling my name. I stand, smoothing down my shirtfront. The officer nods and Jeron, handcuffed, is ushered into the room by another officer. I breathe a sigh of relief at finally seeing him; I always worry that I might not get that chance again. The officer uncuffs him and hands over a few confiscated belongings—an old flip-phone, a watch, some earbuds. I wrap my arms around his slender body and stand there for a moment, his arms hanging at his sides.

“Who’s she?” he grunts, motioning toward Christina.

“Oh...she’s my friend.” I turn toward her, ready to make introductions.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jeron says, slapping my behind. He heads for the front door.

I scoop my bag off the floor. “I’m sure he’ll be out soon—your Steven,” I say to Christina. “Good luck.”

“Thank you. Really, thank you.” She grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze.

I turn away and walk quickly for the door. Jeron is already outside. The sun has come out full-force and I shield my face as I walk down the concrete steps. My eyes take a minute to adjust. I ask Jeron if he’s hungry, if he wants to go get a bite to eat somewhere. He’s not and he doesn’t. We walk to the bus station a few blocks away and buy tickets home.

While we wait on the bus to arrive, we sit on a bench on the sidewalk. I tell him a little bit about Christina. I don’t mention that her man got arrested for drug trafficking. He doesn’t seem to be listening. Probably just distracted, or tired. He’s looking off down the street as I talk. When I place my hand on his leg, he pushes it off.

So instead, I stay quiet and think about Christina, Older Christina. Naïve, knocked up Christina. She is so young. I was there once. *Do something with your life, Janiah.*

The bus ride home is quiet, only a few other people riding. I want to say more, but I'm not sure what will get a response out of him, or what he might take the wrong way. So I don't say anything. I want to hold his hand or lay my head on his shoulder. When I look over, his face is blank, solemn. I still love him. Of course I do. I shift in my seat, readjusting the bag in my lap, and stare straight in front of me.



# OUT OF THE BLUE

*Noelle Hisnanick*

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Getting struck by lightning seemed to be a family trend. My uncle was struck when he was seventeen years old, just cutting the grass on a regular day. A summer storm popped up and he didn't want to go inside—even though his mother stood on the front porch yelling, “Get in here, stupid!” It hit him down the side of his right arm, leaving a large, spidery scar that, even years after the fact, he'd still love showing to horrified onlookers. Apparently, the odds of being a lightning victim are one in 3,000. So it's pretty ridiculous that both my uncle and I could be counted among the few who get electrified at some point in their life. Of course, it would happen to me—luck's never been on my side.

When I got struck, I was thirty-eight years old, working as a house painter in South Carolina. I'd started the business myself, calling it Martha's Painting Services. Fortunately, I lived in a small town that was home to many wealthy, elderly residents with dilapidated mansions. I managed to hire a few employees, and I even had t-shirts printed. The work was exhausting, not to mention dangerous, but it was one of the better jobs I've had.

“Hey boss, let's load up,” one of my painters, Rick, said. “Looks like there's a storm coming.”

I'd been thinking the same thing, but I was hot and tired and didn't need him telling me what to do.

“How about we finish the job we started, huh?” I said, looking down at him from the ladder on which I stood.

Our project that day was one we'd been working on for the past week: the home of the town's mayor, Erin Montgomery. She was about my age, young enough to keep the place looking neat. It was the nicest house in its neighborhood—a sprawling, three-story Victorian mansion with a wrap-around porch—and she asked us to paint it a nauseatingly bright, lemony yellow.

“I want something happy and welcoming,” the mayor had told us, looking at the selection of yellow paint cards I held out to her. She had a voice just like Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*, though a little raspier. I attributed this to the fact that I'd never seen her without a cigarette clutched gingerly between two of her manicured fingers.

“That's your call, ma'am,” I'd told her. There were so many colors to pick from and she had to choose the one that would give me a headache to look at all day.

Low, dark clouds were hanging in the sky and thunder had been rumbling consistently for the past half hour. I let Rick and the others leave once the rain started.

“Y'all go ahead,” I told them. “I'm just going to finish up here.”

As they drove off, I allowed myself to rest my aching arms against the house for a moment. My white Martha's Painting Services shirt was soaked through and I knew my bra was showing for anyone who cared to look. But I didn't care. The rain felt good. I climbed down the ladder slowly, not in any hurry. I had almost reached the ground when there was a crack like a tree splitting in half and something hit me like a jumbo jet. I came to lying face up in the grass with Erin Montgomery standing over me.

“Oh my lord,” she kept saying, “Oh my lord. Are you okay, honey?”

My insides had been turned to soup and my head buzzed like crazy.

“What happened?” I said, my voice weak.

“You were struck by lightning! There was this boom and a bright flash of light—I happened to be looking out the window right when you went down. So of course I ran out here and—and I don’t know what to do. You need a doctor!”

I tried to sit up, but my muscles went limp in protest. “Oh man.”

The rain-soaked, wide-eyed mayor, looking for all I could tell like a scared golden retriever, somehow managed to pull me to my feet and guide me into her enormous house.

“Now just come on inside,” she said, “and we’ll get you all taken care of.”

“I don’t—I don’t need help. I’m fine.”

She dragged me into the living room and I stumbled to an expensive-looking couch where I collapsed, wet clothes and all.

“Now you just sit tight and I’ll call 9-1-1,” she said, her voice now shaking considerably.

“Don’t!” I said, trying to wrestle some authority back into my voice. “Don’t.”

“Honey, you just got struck by lightning! You need to go to the emergency room.”

“Look, I’m okay. Just give me a couple seconds...”

There was absolutely no way I was going to let her have someone come and take me to a hospital where they’d make me wait three hours just for them to do nothing and make me pay for it.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I said, trying to ignore that crazy, non-stop buzzing in my head. “I’m good.”

Erin Montgomery was perched across the room from me in a velvet, wing-backed armchair. She sat ramrod straight, staring at me, with a cigarette in one hand and a phone in the other. Her wet blonde hair was flat against her head and streaks of mascara scored her high cheekbones.

“You don’t look good,” she said.

“Speak...for yourself.”

I took a few deep breaths, counting to seven. It was the technique I had used in the past whenever I’d feel a panic attack coming on. I liked to believe that if I could just control the air coming in and out of my lungs I’d be all right.

“I can drive myself home,” I said, attempting to sit up straighter.

“Oh my lord! Drive yourself home?”

“Yeah. Drive. Myself.”

I stood up and took a step forward in a moment of confidence. My legs felt like Jell-O and I fell back on the couch.

“Please let me call an ambulance, you’re scaring me.”

If I had had more control of my faculties I might have socked the woman. What had I done to deserve this? “Miss Montgomery,” I said.

“Oh no, no—call me Erin.”

“Erin, I do not need to go to the hospital.”

“Well, is there anyone I can call?”

“No.”

I leaned back and closed my eyes. My head felt like it was floating away from my body and a deep ache had started growing in the core of my bones. Still, the hospital wasn’t an option I was going to entertain. I didn’t have any burns and my heart was still beating—I was fine. There was a long silence and the room filled with the smell of Erin’s cigarette as she puffed away nervously.

Suddenly, I heard her stand up. I opened my eyes to find her looking at me with smiling determination.

“Well, honey, if you won’t let me take you to the hospital, let me at least get you a cup of nice hot tea.”



This offer was ridiculous under the circumstances, but what was the point in protesting? I'd been around women like Erin Montgomery before and rejecting their hospitality is pretty much impossible—it must be endured. And, anyway, I wasn't completely revolted at the thought of hot tea.

"Okay," I said, tacking on a mumbled "thanks" with effort.

"No problem at all," Erin said. "Let me go get the kettle on and I'll be back shortly." She hurried out of the room, but not before patting me on the shoulder. What was with this cheery, Pollyanna stuff? It was like I'd suddenly become her honored house guest who'd stopped by for an afternoon visit.

The room seemed incredibly quiet now that she had left and I finally let myself look around at the place. Everything emanated wealth and fine taste. The carpet was oriental, thick, and immaculate. The entirety of one wall was covered with built-in shelves holding books and vases arranged in an order so precise I'd be terrified to even go near them. There was a piano in one corner. I hadn't really expected anything less from the house of Erin Montgomery. She was the picture of precision and sophistication—well, minus that smoking habit, of course. Before she hired my team for the painting job, I'd only ever seen her once. That was a year ago, at an Easter service at the First Baptist church. I remembered she'd sat alone towards the back, like me.

Her voice cut through the silence, calling from the kitchen, "Do you like Earl Grey? Or raspberry?"

"Uh...raspberry," I said, still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that she was getting me tea. Tea, for goodness sake. Was I suddenly living in a Hallmark movie?

"Oh, wait—I also have some English Breakfast."

"That's fine."

I couldn't even imagine how strange I must have looked in that house. The whole situation was just insanely weird. There I was, in my soaking t-shirt and paint-splattered jeans with my stringy hair pulled back, no makeup, sitting in this huge, fancy living room on this expensive couch. Because I'd been struck by lightning. How much crazier does it get?

I felt a movement on the cushion next to me and something soft touched my arm. I looked down and found myself staring into the eyes of an orange Persian cat.

"Hi," I said.

The cat quickly disregarded any formalities and curled up on my lap.

"I see you've met Gatsby," Erin said, entering the room. She handed me a mug. "Careful, honey, it's hot."

Of course she named her cat after a crazy, rich person.

"Listen," I said, "I appreciate this and all. But could you please stop calling me honey? My name is Martha."

"Oh of course!" Erin said, sitting back down in the velvet chair. I touched the top of the cat's head and it began purring loudly. Apparently it had no qualms about wet clothing. I bet it couldn't feel anything through all that fur.

"Thanks for the tea," I said.

Erin smiled.

"Just as soon as I'm feeling able, I'll be out of your hair," I said.

"No rush," she replied, putting the butt of her cigarette in an ashtray next to her chair, "It's no problem at all. No problem at all."

We both sipped our tea for a moment.

"You know," I said, finding the silence awkward, "my uncle was struck by lightning. My family must be cursed or something."

"Well, that's odd," Erin said, "very odd."

"It seems sort of...cruel, you know? A bolt of lightning that could have gone anywhere

on the planet, could have just hit a tree or something—but no, it had to hit me.”

Erin nodded sympathetically.

I stared into my tea. “Isn’t there a place in the Bible where God struck someone with lightning for being wicked?”

“Well, I’m sure that’s not the case in your situation.”

I took another sip of the tea, hoping it would help the chills I was starting to get.

“Look at you, you’re shaking,” Erin said.

At first the dampness of my clothes had been tolerable but now, not so much. The air conditioner was blasting in that house.

“How about you go take a shower?” Erin suggested.

“What? Oh no, that’s not necessary—”

“No. I insist. I don’t mind you using my shower. And besides, you’ve gotten my couch all muddy.”

I hadn’t thought about the fact that my fall must have covered me in mud.

“Okay, okay,” I said, and got up carefully.

I stood in the hot water, not moving, for a solid minute. A shower had never felt so good. I picked up a bar of green soap with Erin’s monogram engraved on it. What is even the point of that, I wondered. It smelled like rosemary and lilac. Not like the cheap, bottled stuff I bought at the dollar store. I imagined living a life like this. Everything so well-ordered and impeccable. Nothing but the highest quality, from the furniture all the way to the soap. Dirt pooled on the floor of the shower around my feet—it must have been caked in my hair. Suddenly, the hilarity of it all was too much for me, and I laughed. I thought about maybe telling Rick and the others about the whole experience. But then I reconsidered. They probably wouldn’t believe me.

After the shower, I put on some clothes of Erin’s that she had insisted I borrow. It was a pink track suit that almost fit—except it was slightly too small in the hips and too large in the bust.

I went back into the living room to find Erin sitting at the piano, plinking out “My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music*. She had changed into a pair of slacks and a green blouse and neaten up her hair and makeup. It looked like she was about to attend a garden party.

She paused and looked over her shoulder at me. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah,” I said, and sat back down on the couch.

She began plinking again.

“That piano’s out of tune,” I said.

She turned around on the bench to face me, “Is it?”

“Definitely. I tuned pianos for a living once.”

“Really? A piano-tuner and a house painter—you’re multi-talented.”

“Oh, I’ve done more than that. I’ve fixed cars, worked in hotels, even done some carpentry.”

“A jack-of-all-trades.”

I shrugged.

“You know,” she said, “I’m glad you’re here. It’s nice to have some company.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Now, I’m not saying it’s a good thing you got struck by lightning. It’s just that I love entertaining people—I guess you could say it’s my hobby.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I believe that hospitality is a lost art in our culture. If we could simply reignite the tradition of hospitality, we could enact great change in this world. Everyone is so isolated these days. Eventually, I hope to start holding parties in this house just like

they used to in the old times. Dances in the parlor with a little string quartet, I could make punch, all the girls dressed in long gowns..." Her voice trailed off and she rested her chin in her hand.

Gatsby realized that I'd returned to the couch and sat back down on my lap contentedly. Though I still had a nagging desire to leave, it was nice to be sitting down. The shower had drained me of what little energy I had left. I felt my focus fade in and out, as weak and difficult to control as my muscles. Erin started playing the piano again and I felt the sound wash over me like a spell I couldn't shake off.

"I wonder what the long-term effects of this will be," I said.

She stopped playing and took her phone out of her pocket. "I'll look it up."

"Don't tell me if there's something really bad," I said.

After a minute of searching Google she said, "Well you must not have been hit directly because if you had, you'd most likely be dead."

"My uncle was hit directly. He got a freaky scar from it."

"He was lucky."

"Since when is it lucky to get struck by lightning?"

"Oh!" Erin said, "Here's something. Apparently, mysterious physical and psychological symptoms can emerge. Experts say that survivors should be on the look-out for changes in personality and mental function as the result of being struck. Also, you could experience vision and hearing loss, chronic pain, and lapses in your ability to remember things."

"Great."

"Oh dear, this one article says that you might grapple with a shift in identity and feel increasingly alienated as a result of the rarity of your condition."

My hand dug into Gatsby's warm, soft fur. "Well there it is. Great."

Why had this happened to me? It was always like this—things hitting me out of the blue, right when I least expected them. Like the loss of my last job or the divorce of my parents when I was a teenager. Whenever I'd feel like I was finally getting my life together, something would come out of nowhere and smack me upside the head and turn everything upside down. Did this kind of stuff happen to Erin? Erin with her perfect house and her monogrammed soap and her fluffy cat? Probably not. Her life was boring—what a dream.

"You want a cigarette?" Erin asked. She'd already lit one for herself.

"Sure," I said.

She walked over to the couch, sat down next to me, and handed me the cigarette, "Are you okay?"

I couldn't answer for a while. Maybe the tears coming to my eyes were the result of the stupid psychological damage from the lightning. I hadn't wanted to cry in probably twenty years.

"Why are you doing this?" I finally said.

Erin shrugged, "Selfish reasons, really. I have no friends."

"No friends?" I said, "But you're so..."

"Welcoming? I guess some people find it overwhelming."

I chuckled, "I can see that."



## CHURCH APPROPRIATE

*Hannah Jones*

---

Being raised in the embrace of the church, I learned to rebel in small ways. First it was subtle: a reference to a not-so family-friendly movie here, a Harry Potter Halloween costume there. Heaven forbid, a sleeveless dress in the middle of July. Let me tell you, church ladies love to scan outfits on Sunday mornings to make sure kneecaps and upper arms aren't causing a stir. And I understand. But still. Wearing sixty-three layers to make your trendy outfit "church appropriate" takes a toll. First there is the camisole under the dress if it's cut below the collar bone. Then comes the cardigan to cover the shoulders, and sometimes you need a longer skirt under the dress if the dress stops short. It was exhausting.

But then came the shoes: gorgeous red patent leather stilettos with a two-inch platform and a four-inch heel at minimum. I had to have them. I figured the shoes for a show stopper, but not a trendsetter, at least not at church. Boy was I wrong. The ladies of the church were all over them. Where did I get them? How much did they cost? Did they have any more colors? You know the old saying, "the bigger the hair, the closer to heaven?" Well, we replaced hair with heels and ran with it. According to the urban dictionary what we're talking about here is a type of womens' footwear that is "sexy, yet trashy," a shoe that "generally adds a certain sashay." Let me tell you, I never expected to see a riptide of sashaying booties at an altar call, but maybe there's a little rebellion in all of us. Maybe while I was seeing closed minds and tight lips, I wasn't really seeing them at all.



# KEEPING TIME

*Coleman Topalu*

---

My grandfather and I have been close since the day I was born. That might have something to do with the initials we share, but a part of me suspects that whole business was actually just a clever plot, devised by my father and my grandmother to trick Grandpa into cleaning out all of his old office supplies. But that might be giving them a little bit too much credit. One thing is for certain, though. I will be as old as he is before I manage to burn through half of my life-time supply of “C.T.” embossed notepads, pencils, Thank You cards, and that five-pound bag of M&Ms. Turns out that for a nominal fee, the Mars candy company will print almost anything on those little guys. My grandfather figured it out. And he had a field day.

Between his creative genius and my grandmother’s common sense, birthdays and Christmases are always special. Sometimes the gifts are fun, other times they are practical. But they are always thoughtful. One gift in particular stands out. It’s not what one might call fun or practical, but that’s okay. The best gifts don’t need to be. I was a senior in high school when my grandfather took me aside on Christmas morning and gave me his pocket watch. My grandfather told me that the watch was a birthday gift he received from Grandma many years ago. Or it could have been a Christmas present. Or possibly something else entirely. He couldn’t remember the exact occasion, and we both knew better than to go and ask Grandma to remind him. So we agreed it was probably a Christmas present, and we let the finer details remain a mystery.

I spent a lot of time that afternoon just staring at it. It fascinated me. The pocket watch felt fragile, and as I rapped my fingers gently against its polished finish, I couldn’t help but worry that I might wind up putting my fingers through the gears if I wasn’t careful. But the watch was well-made. There was also a certain beauty to the watch, a kind of mature charm that held me captivated. As I held it against the light, I noticed a few stray scratches here and there. The golden finish was a bit smudged too. But all those little nicks and blemishes made me happy. They told me the watch was a keepsake my grandfather cherished. He probably carried it with him every day during his working years. Later my grandfather confessed years had passed since he last wore it and likely many more since it was last properly wound—which explained why the minute and second hands were always fixed at the same angle, no matter how many times a day I checked. He laughed and told me to spend a minute or two twirling the gears between my fingers. “It’ll start barking out ticks and tocks, if you just give it a little time.” I was excited. This pocket watch had been a part of his life, and now he wanted to make it a part of mine.

Suddenly, I imagined myself as an ancient wizard, wandering through the ages at my own quirky leisure. The simple task of winding up the watch made me feel like surely I had agency over time itself. It was around this time I realized that I didn’t know what part of the watch I was supposed to wind. Back to Grandpa I went. The exercise took maybe thirty seconds. Right along the spot where the watch is anchored to its chain, there is a little gold button. Press this little gold button, and the watch pops open like a clamshell, shyly revealing its face and hands. A little gold ring hugs this little gold button, and if I pinched the ring gently between my thumb and index finger, I could pop it a few

notches and coax out a click or two. With any luck, the gears would have enough juice to keep time for another twelve hours. Eventually, we did get the hands moving again. The minute and seconds hands looked perfectly happy, spinning around however they liked, but Grandpa and I weren't satisfied. As Christmas drew to a close, he recommended I ask my dad for advice and maybe find a hole-in-the-wall watch repair shop somewhere in town. We wanted to see what kind of unholy magic was making the watch so uncooperative. The watch repair kiosk at our local mall proved to be just what we needed. Two days and twenty dollars later I owned a working pocket watch. I remember asking the kiosk's manager what was wrong with it. "Just dirty," he said.

From that point forward, the watch worked just as advertised. It keeps time; it's handy, and to this day it remains immensely satisfying to wind. Since my senior year of high school, it's been my favorite way—and my only way—to accessorize any clothing ensemble. Figuring out how to accessorize with a fifty-five year-old pocket watch was tricky, but I got creative and like to think I came up with a stylish solution. Instead of wearing a pompous-looking suit jacket to school every day, I threaded the chain through my belt loops and tucked the watch inside of my pocket. The watch was cool against my thigh, but it was a refreshing kind of cold, even in the winter. I guess that was another trick of the watch. In addition to keeping time, it reminded me not to waste mine.

A long, long time ago, likely just hours after it was manufactured and the watch was more marshmallow than metal, someone (probably at my grandmother's request) took a fine instrument and carved, in sublime cursive, "C.T." across the watch face. Like the small scratches that cover its golden clamshell, the letters are just barely visible. Duplicating this effect wouldn't be hard; people have been making watches for a long time. I'm sure there is someone in the world capable of mass-producing enough of these watches to keep an entire country on time. But reproducing the emotions packed inside? That's impossible. Those belong to us.

Not long after I received the watch, I attended a business lecture about inheritance. We discussed the legal and emotional tape that binds people to their property, as well as the consequences of not protecting the things that matter to you the most. It was an important lesson, but I walked away from it with more than just a head full of facts. That lecture confirmed something I think I knew all along. My grandfather's real present wasn't the watch at all.



# COLLECTING RAINWATER

*Jenni Harris*

---

Listen, black bird throats—  
their songs like faucets dripping  
into deeper wells.



# EVERGREEN

*Emily Schrieffer*

---

Green through the winter,  
the old forgotten pine stands  
icebound and silenced.





# GLIMPSE OF GOD

*Taylor Henry*

---

I've heard of her majestic grace:  
she surfaces then disappears,  
mottled skin with barnacles,  
a broad fluke and knuckled back.  
She snorts a spray of salty mist,  
calmly and smoothly gliding  
through the icy waters.  
She turns in the depths unobserved  
for she knows and understands  
the ways of the Pacific.  
I'll sit among silverweed and twisted pine,  
searching the sea, waiting for my first  
sighting.



# AUNTIE SAM

*Coleman Topalu*

---

Between her four husbands, three failed businesses, and a month and a half long stint at the local prison ward, Auntie Sam had plenty of stories to tell. Unfortunately, surviving all of these experiences had also left her feeling as though it was her duty to hand out advice to the rest of the family. There were plenty of us who needed it, I think. Her sister's marriage was on the brink of collapse, and seeing as how her own son hadn't left her basement since his twenty-first birthday (he'll be twenty-eight in April), there were plenty of worthy candidates in her own backyard. Her extended family hadn't fared much better.

My parents had made the mistake of co-signing on a bad loan, and my older brothers were all struggling to scrounge up enough alimony to pay off their wives; all my younger siblings were too busy trying to get laid in the first place. Between those of us she saw on a regular basis (i.e. those of us who showed up on her doorstep for Christmas), I was perhaps the only one whose life wasn't on the slow train to self-destruction. I had a loving wife, we paid off our house this year and the car the year before that, and we both held high-paying jobs in pretty stable industries—private tutors for rich idiots make bank. If you can see where this is going, congrats. You're already a good deal smarter than most of the people in my family. Obviously, since there were no fires in my life that needed to be put out, Auntie Sam felt compelled to start a few. My wife became her first target.

“Tabby's cheating on you, I'll betcha.”

Now, something I'd like to make clear is that when Auntie Sam shared this thoughtful revelation with me during her annual Christmas party (dusty wine glass in hand, cigarette pinched limp between her pocked lips) she didn't mean any harm. Most would think she was spiteful, seeing as how I had my stuff together and she didn't have much stuff at all.

But that would require Auntie to admit to herself that we are doing better now than she was doing at our age, and that would require her to admit to herself she hadn't already experienced the very best life had to offer. Four husbands, three failed businesses, and a criminal record may be a scarlet letter to some women, but Auntie Sam didn't think like that. See, Auntie Sam didn't think at all. The rest of the Christmas party was deaf to her announcement. They either didn't hear her or didn't care. Most of them were probably just praying silently that I had the decency to take one for the family and keep her occupied for a few minutes. I loaded my paper plate up with the foulest, greasiest, most garlic-charged finger foods I could find and after stuffing them into my mouth, turned to face her.

“Your sweet wife of yours—I think she's cheating on you. That's what I think.”

I nodded slowly as though I didn't understand what she was telling me. I exhaled through my pursed lips, hoping the cloves of garlic clinging to the roof of my mouth would be enough to scare her away. I should have known better. Auntie Sam had smoked a pack a day since the Beatles dropped ship from Liverpool back in the 60s; she hadn't been able to smell the candles on her birthday cake in thirty years. My first line of

defense failed, and Auntie Sam did as the victorious do. As I stepped back, she stepped forward. I counted the hairs on her upper lip. The punch had stained them a delightful candy-apple red. I reached for my own glass of punch, but I couldn't find it. It was around that time I noticed Auntie Sam was clutching two. She drained them both.

"You ever wonder where she goes, all by herself, late at night? Especially on Saturdays?" I shook my head. "Tabby doesn't go out on Saturdays, Auntie. And she doesn't really go anywhere by herself."

Auntie Sam's eyes narrowed. She swirled both drinks for a moment before swallowing.

"I'm not convinced, love. A pretty little thing like her? You are much older than she is, after all. Old men are sound sleepers, y'know. I bet she could sneak out real quiet like and you'd never know." I shook my head again. Auntie Sam kept up the pressure. "You're so sure, are you? Overconfidence is bad, Davie. Got me into a lot of trouble, back in the old—who's the cripple?"

Though her burgeoning confidence and bold assertions about my wife's character didn't suggest it, Auntie Sam had never actually met Tabby before. Auntie wasn't invited to the wedding (can't imagine why, now can you?) and we hadn't been married for more than a year. She knew I was married though, and that alone was enough to pump her imagination tank full of gas. I had prepared for this, however. As soon as I caught Auntie slipping, I reached for my wallet and fished out a few pieces of evidence I was confident would swing the debate in my favor—chief among them, a picture of a cute little thing tearing down our driveway in a periwinkle wheelchair.

"That's Tabby, Auntie." Auntie took the picture in her stubby hands and held it upside down, right-side up, and backwards, studying it as only she could. She looked at the picture and then back to me.

"She's crippled? That's terrible! A sweet girl, honest like her." She pocketed it and crossed her arms. "What a shame. Crippled!" The way she looked at me when she said this aloud made it sound as though that part of my wife's character was my fault. But at least now she was convinced Tabby wasn't sleeping around on me.

"Yes. Freak accident with a kangaroo, happened when she was in college. Been in a wheelchair ever since." This was a lie. It was also my way out. I was convinced I couldn't get away from Auntie Sam now; I had looked the proverbial panhandler in the eye. It was too late to go back. The least I could do now was control the topic of conversation. Sure enough, almost as soon as I had said it—

"How tragic! You know, Russell was attacked by a kangaroo once, while he was away on a business trip. Nasty things! They have venomous fangs built into the soles of their feet, you know."

I nodded, but I kept my mouth shut. She was working herself into a roll now. Interrupting this would be dangerous. Russell was one of her ex-husbands, by the way. He was the third, in between Ross and Randy. She had a thing for the letter 'R'. I have my own private theories explaining why that is.

"So she's been a cripple for a few years...Doesn't the wheelchair affect her mobility?"

I shook my head and bit my lip. "Well, no, not really. See, she grew up in Australia, so not having proper use of her legs isn't that big of a deal." I let this hang in the air for a bit, punctuating the absurdity with a long sip from my punch glass. Auntie Sam shifted her legs a little. She didn't like it when other people thought she was ignorant. I stared at her caricature from behind my glass. She was shooting me a pleading look. I lowered the glass, smiled, and raised my fingers. "Everything's upside down over there y'know, so she's been walking on her hands since she was just a little girl." I refilled my punch glass, all the while staring her down as though the answer should have been obvious.

Auntie stared blankly at the Christmas tree glowing behind us. Her eyes were empty,

but if I were to guess, she was trying to work out in her head whether or not what I had just told her was the truth. For as wise as she thought she was, she was about as cultured as a crocodile. To make matters worse, she was an avid listener of public radio. She knew next to nothing about the world outside of her hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, and all of her husbands had learned early on about the mistakes of filling her head with things as trivial as facts.

I held out my arms and flexed. “She’s got crazy strong upper-body strength, though. Whenever she wants to get something, she just hops around on her hands.” I fished a pair of gloves from my coat pocket and stretched them out so they could dry in the heat of the living room. “She has to wear gloves when it gets cold out, though. I picked up an extra pair at the store on my way over here.” I leaned in close. “Tabby likes the periwinkle ones. They match her wheels, after all.” Auntie Sam nodded emphatically, totally engrossed in my wife and her imaginary talents, looking at her own hands as though they were hiding incredible, untapped potential.

For the next hour, I entertained Auntie Sam with imaginary stories about my crippled wife and her imaginary escapades. When she orders coffee at the corner store, she balances the cup on her head. When she needs to open a door, she stands on one hand and knocks with the other. When she’s about to get mugged on the streets, she steals her enemies shoes and refuses to return them until they leave her alone. All of these were lies, and Auntie Sam, being the intelligent, experienced woman of the world that she is, believed all of them. She seemed quite disappointed when I finally ran out of stories to tell. I was not.

These annual Christmas parties were usually all-night affairs, but I’ve always tried to slip out before midnight (Cinderella style) so I can scurry back home and eat some real food before bed. The problem was Auntie Sam had taken a liking to me; every time I tried to break for the door, she magically made her way to the other side to block my exit. Then she’d take me by the hand and lead me around to greet even more of my relatives. I could have tolerated this, if she hadn’t insisted I repeat everything I had just told her about my wife to every other person in the house.

I was confident I knew exactly how smart Auntie was, so I knew I could get away with lying to her for the sake of entertainment. Everyone else was a different story. She only seemed to target those relatives that I knew exclusively through birthday and Christmas cards. They were all semi-intelligent people who knew that Australians didn’t walk around on their hands and that kangaroos don’t have venomous fangs growing in between their toes. It wasn’t all bad, though. Auntie seemed determined to tell everyone we met that I was funny and smart and blessed with a wonderful, talented young wife. I knew better than to toot my own horn, but I wasn’t going to deny that last one was true. The conversations always seemed to shift back to Tabby, which worked out in my favor, surprisingly. She wasn’t there to call me out on my lies, so all I had to do to keep awkwardness at bay was lie about other “wife-related things.” My tall tales about my magical wife were spreading around the party like wildfire, and before long, everyone was bumping shoulders, eager to hear more about her and her many mysterious gifts. I was surprised to find just how many people really believed what I was saying was true, but I didn’t fight fate. All the wine they were guzzling must have suspended their disbelief.

So I took the plunge.

“How did you meet? She seems like such a celebrity...What brought you two together?”

According to everyone in the dining hall, Tabby used to work for the Australian government’s space program. However, after a mysterious incident with a flying saucer left her without the proper use of her legs, she retired at the tender age of twenty-five and moved to the United States to run a rescue mission that helps misplaced hamsters

find loving homes. We met one afternoon when I arrived on her doorstep, half a dozen hamsters in hand, determined to find them all a home.

But those lounging in the living room said that story was...not all it should be, in terms of credibility or verisimilitude. What really happened, they said, was that Tabby was an ex-marine who moved to the United States after several successful tours overseas. Her ultimate goal? She wanted to teach sign language to the blind. We met at a restaurant and when she saw how clumsy I was, mistook me for one of her students, and insisted I come back to class with her. From there, I feigned my own disability so I could spend more time with her. When she found out I was lying to her, she threatened to put out my eyes for real, but eventually softened up. According to that story, we were married two days later.

Before long, I wasn't even needed behind the driver's seat. The entire party's topic of conversation shifted towards my wife, her talents, her expertise, and how in the world a shmuck like me managed to win her heart. The debates turned heated; Uncle Steve and Cousin Drew (who had never gotten along to begin with) soon found themselves on the floor, hands at each other's throats, quite literally wrestling for the truth. The house stood divided: there were those relatives who believed Tabby was an astronaut, and there were those who trusted she was an ex-marine. For a while, there was also a third story floating around about losing the use of her legs in a pro-wrestling stunt gone wrong, but those rumors dried up when no one could agree on what her stage name could have been.

I had no problem with the way things were unfolding. So long as no one looked at me and saw a fountain of truth, I couldn't care less what they thought about my wife. I had insisted she stay home, mostly out of selfish embarrassment. I didn't want to reveal these people to my wife. There are some things in your family you'd just prefer to keep under wraps. In a bid to escape the debate, I slipped into the kitchen. It was the quickest route out of the house that didn't cut directly through the living room, which was now so densely packed with arguing guests that going out the front door would have been an impossible, uncomfortable proposition. As I made my beeline towards the back door, something caught my eye. I stopped to look around, and as I turned, I saw Auntie Sam sitting on top of the kitchen table, looking quite pensive. She seemed to have taken a great interest in the curling wallpaper. I froze, stock-still, and tried to tiptoe around her as quietly as possible. Alcohol affects us all in different ways, usually by bringing out the parts of ourselves we normally have the common sense to keep locked up.

Auntie Sam was a quiet drunk. I knew a few people like her: life of the party, right up until their blood alcohol content crosses a certain invisible threshold. After that, they go mute. It was a little unsettling, watching her all by her lonesome, kicking her legs gently and sipping on her wine. She looked almost like a normal adult, silently debating inside her head all the real-world responsibilities she was going to inherit after the party was over.

What kind of person would I be to interrupt such a rare moment of composure?

I reached for the back door and tried to open it as quietly as possible. One foot was out the door when I heard Auntie Sam clear her throat.

"You've got a very good wife, Davie."

My name is Daniel, but she got the first syllable right, so that was good enough. I reluctantly stepped back inside and propped the door open with my foot. The midnight air was very cold. Someone up the road was cooking something good over an open flame. I nodded, but didn't say anything. I had never had the pleasure of a drunken conversation with Auntie Sam before, and I wasn't sure I was ready to pull the pin on that grenade quite yet.

“She sounds like a very talented woman. To have been to the moon and back at such a young age, only to hop on over to Afghanistan right after to fight off terrorists and those evil oil raccoons.” I assumed she meant “oil tycoons,” but I didn’t want to correct her. There was something different about the tone of her voice; something dreamy, almost reverent. I didn’t like it. Auntie Sam drained her wine glass and placed it on the table. Then she turned to face me.

“I really envy her.”

I couldn’t speak. This kind of confession was unprecedented. I scooped the empty wine glass off the table and sniffed it. It didn’t smell like it had been drugged. I gently rapped my knuckles against her head. She swayed back and forth a little at my touch and smiled, but she didn’t look *totally* sloshed. Against my better judgment, I sat down on the chair beside her.

“You’ve done cool things too, Auntie.”

“Really?”

“You’ve hosted this party every year, haven’t you? I think that’s pretty cool.”

“Maybe. But Tabitha probably held all kinds of parties up in space.” Auntie Sam kicked her feet faster. “This little soirée can’t compete with that.” Then, without warning, she smacked me upside my head. “Why didn’t you bring her along? Did you think we wouldn’t like her or something?” I shook my head and cooked up another fib.

“No...not at all. It’s just...she’s not feeling very well...and your house isn’t exactly handicap accessible.” This wasn’t a total lie. Auntie Sam’s house was at the top of a very tall hill and almost every room in the house was connected by winding staircases. Even if I had brought her along, we’d have been confined to just a few rooms; Tabby wouldn’t like that. She liked to stretch her wheels. From behind her eyes, I could see Auntie Sam’s brain working out the fastest way to remodel her house. Then her enthusiasm dried up and she busied herself by studying her empty wine glass.

“Compared to her, I’m not all that impressive.” She let the empty wine glass slip through her fingers and clatter to the floor. “Four husbands, three failed businesses, and a criminal record. And I’m already fifty-five years old.”

“To be fair, you were only in prison for a little over a month.”

She mulled this over with a nod, but she still looked awfully glum.

“What were you in for, anyway?”

She turned away and frowned at her hardwood floor. “Littering.”

I smiled. So I wasn’t the only one who was lying.

As we sat in the kitchen, I couldn’t help but feel my heart go out to Auntie Sam. I still didn’t like her, but I felt like my lies and exaggerations were the reasons why she was so down on herself. It’s awfully hard to compete with fantasy. I wasn’t about to tell her the truth, though. I was from a family of jerks and idiots, if you couldn’t already tell. But I figured if my lies were clever enough to make Auntie Sam feel bad about herself, they just might be good enough to make her feel good about herself.

“You know Auntie, Tabby’s mom turned seventy-five earlier this year.”

“How about that?”

“Yup. She finally opened the bakery she’s been dreaming about since she was just a little girl.”

“At seventy-five?” I nodded. Auntie Sam hopped off the table and picked her empty wine glass up off the floor. I offered to fill it up for her. She smiled.

“Such a young thing.”

# WHITNEY HOUSTON

Jenni Harris

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Out beyond our little wooden house without doors, beyond the tree roots where we discard our leftover onion peels and potato scraps, beyond the pile of cast away termite-infested tree limbs and the carcasses of cockroaches embedded in their remaining bark, back in the fields littered with thin tree stumps cut off at the knee and the brown, sandy cones of leafcutter ants, a foot and a half wide bench has been constructed in the exact spot where, in the middle of the Amazon Jungle, a single beam of cell phone service can be found. Sometimes. It stands alone, blending into the broken trees, lost among the carnage until Kyle or Stacy, our mission trip leaders, come out to sit on it, waiting to get weekly updates from their boss, our ministry contact back in the States. But today is my turn. I'm holding the team cell, an old, black flip phone that sits heavy in my hand like an eight ball. I wait for it to speak.

We'd been in the jungle for three weeks with five weeks to go. Fourteen of us, college students gathered from across North America, signed up for this summer mission trip with a ministry organization based in Georgia, a ministry that made us all go to a five day training camp where they (literally) turned the room where we worshipped each night into a dance floor. They played loud music that people swayed to, and their bodies moved along with the beat like their midsections were tied with a guitar string to the worship leader's hands as he raised them up and down. I tried to get into it, but really I just stood there with my thumbs pointing towards heaven and hands rigid like they had just been handed a stranger's screaming baby.

To be fair, that uncertainty wasn't solely the result of that moment and that music and that swaying. I think it had soaked through my church clothes and into my bloodstream after the years and years that I had spent sitting on salmon-colored church pews listening to a red-headed buzz-cut with a pointer finger tell me that if I was saved, I *better* want to go to the "hard places" and spread the Gospel. And after going on a few one-week mission trips where we stayed in hotels and compounds, and after getting a few passport stamps, I thought of the cold showers I had taken and the bumpy roads I had traveled as a small, uncomfortable price to pay to see the world. And to do good. And to tell people about God's gift of salvation through Jesus. So when I felt restless and *compelled to want to give up* my summer doing international missions work, I said yes to God. I said yes to travel, yes to leaving behind my family, yes to raising the funds, and yes to loving others the best I knew how. But I also said no. When faced with a list of ten or so countries, I said no to anywhere I thought could seriously jeopardize my health, no to the places that I thought might involve camping, and no to the ones that seemed to be in remote locations. Since all I had to go on was the name of the country, seeing Peru on the list filled my head with images of the colorfully skirted mountain women that grace the covers of tourism brochures and alpacas roaming free on rocky hillsides, a place that seemed just foreign enough to qualify as a "hard place" but not so difficult as to be miserable or desolate. I was excited to be doing something adventurous with my summer, something that I could bring before God, whom I saw

as that distant military commander in charge of all pointing index fingers, and say, “Look, I did this. I went. I believe.”

Out on the bench, I look down at my feet, zig-zagged with sandal tan lines and swollen red with bug bite bumps that leak translucent yellow fluid when scratched. Dark brown leafcutter ants march by with spindly legs, hauling quarter-sized cuts of plant life, some trying to crawl up the wooden legs of the bench and onto my kneecaps. I try to dial again, punching in the buttons of international codes and then the familiar number, my dad’s, as pixelated error messages flash across the screen. He called the emergency line earlier, and a message had been passed along to my team leaders. Stacy pulled me aside, saying something had happened with a grandparent, she didn’t know what, but I should try to get in touch.

After training camp, we flew into Iquitos, capital of the Peruvian Amazon. And as if that didn’t deviate enough from my expectations, the first thing our ministry contacts told us when we saw them was to not get comfortable; we would not be staying in the city. We would be spending our two months at “the farm.” We were given only a few short hours before we were put on a bus to Nauta, a smaller town about two hours southwest, the only other city connected to Iquitos by road at all. We drove the distance and watched as the landscape outside of our windows slowly became leafier, thicker with green, and then when we arrived at a small bus station, we were split into groups of three and put on red motorcars that took us through the streets and down to the Amazon River where we boarded a crimson boat to ride another hour against the current, deeper into a land of muddy river banks and towering trees with threaded bird nests. When we arrived at a painted blue boat dock floating like a front door step, we walked with our belongings up three sticky hills that bled brown in the rain, up past the home of our ministry contact and boat driver, Pedro, and his family, to a stilted two-room house made of wood and mosquito netting. Fat, red spiders dangled from the corners of each window screen to welcome us. No indoor plumbing, no air conditioning, three hours of electricity per night if it wasn’t storming, a place where we could boil rice on a propane stovetop and shower every four days or so with a measuring cup. It didn’t even have doors.

Out on the bench, I hear my teammates inside the house laughing, can hear the ten other girls and three guys lining up for dinner there in the kitchen, where the small slats between the floorboards fill quickly with the thick mud we track in. Everyday we sweep that mud alongside mass casualties of insects out past our front step and into surrounding shallow pools of rainwater, cow urine, and toothpaste spit. Now plastic chairs scrape against the wooden floor, and the call to hold hands for prayer brings about a gentle quiet amid the sounds of calves nearby nuzzling up against the undersides of their mothers. And then it starts to rain. I sit in it for just one moment, letting the water hit the back of my neck. In a place where we all sleep together in one large room, where we eat every meal together and where we have to go everywhere with at least one other person, because it’s literally too dangerous to go by oneself, it is the first time I’ve been alone in too long.

Our first week in the jungle, we visited four local villages, each about an hour away by boat, and asked their leaders if we could minister to the families that lived there. We taught ourselves Spanish Bible songs and put together Vacation Bible School lessons. But then, Pedro asked us to help him do manual labor on the farm instead. We were there to serve. So each day we pulled on our rain boots and trudged through



the muck down to his house, only to be told to simply move one stack of wood fifteen yards from where it was. Each day, that was it. So we spent a lot of our time talking instead. It started with sharing our middle names, *Tyler, Clare, Esther*, and then we started talking of siblings. Of parents. Of grandparents. Their names got stuck in the humidity, seemed to take form in front of us like wispy silhouettes, and we missed them so much that we told each other the stories that they starred in. But we were still restless. We talked about how we had come to Peru to do ministry, to somehow help the less fortunate, to see God in new ways. But instead, we waited. We woke up each morning at five and we either swayed in hammocks or sat around the table with our Bibles opened and ate banana oatmeal out of chipped mugs left behind by a previous mission team. Some mornings, we took one of the large, blue bins out from underneath our cooking supplies to do laundry, and we collected rainwater from two large barrels, each rigged with big, sliding pieces of tin that caught the runoff from our roof. Those mornings, we got a handful of powdery, blue-speckled detergent. And we soaked and scrubbed our dirt-stained clothes until our hands pruned up. Then, we came together and prayed, shared Bible verses, sang worship songs that traveled on the wings of the cowbirds out to the thick canopy of vines and leaves spread around our property like an electric fence that hummed with the sounds of a million wings flapping and insect tongues vibrating. Mosquitos buzzed in and out of our ears where the voice of God should have been, and we waited around for a boat to come take us somewhere, anywhere, that we could do ministry.

But most days we just moved logs for thirty minutes or waited on a boat that never came, all the while growing impatient for a God that seemed to be on leave or reluctant to join us. No conversions, no loving on children, no sharing the Gospel, no "making a difference." We just sat around telling our stories and talking about all that we didn't understand, such as why God had brought us thousands of miles from home only to get thousands of mosquito bites. The buzz-cut with a finger pointed at me, told me to look harder, look harder, always look harder for God. But all I saw were fourteen pairs of secondhand galoshes piled by our front step, filled to their brims with murky rainwater and floating ants.

The rain thickens. I get up from the bench to go inside, walking back to our front step to see the HAPPY BIRTHDAY banner that we made for Tess, one of our teammates, whose twenty-first birthday is today. She's sitting there at the table, eating, all light freckles and bad renditions of Whitney Houston. Brown, thin strands of her hair blow in front of her eyes, muddy green like river water at noon. They are perpetually tired, like folded up little half moons that are accustomed to seeing things in the night. She has legs covered in small scars that frown like wrinkled faces.

Tess told us the story of how her legs came to look like that after pledging a sorority her sophomore year at a California state university. At a frat party where she and the other initiates raced up a railing, took a shot, and jumped into a swimming pool several yards below. Four times. Other girls in bikinis swirled around her in a fragmented blur of bare skin as they ran along the pool deck past the dark, brawny stomachs of fraternity brothers. And by the fourth time, Tess's knees had split open after a fall to thump along with the stereo, to trail crimson spillage down onto bare feet as they speckled the cement with each wet stumble. Breathless, she climbed the slippery railing and felt the shot glass cold between shaking hands and then the burn of amber liquid as it coated her throat before the jump. Her raw skin stretched, ached, her chlorinated mouse hair stuck to the back of her neck. Brothers and sisters chanted as the red from her legs bled cloudy into the tinted pool lights. *Tess, Tess, Tess, Tess*, and then blackness,

as everyone backstroked into the hazy edges of her consciousness. She left college after her sophomore year, strung out on cocaine and boys.

We heard this story our first week as we swatted away mosquitoes in the pavilion, an open-aired shelter about fifty yards from our house. It rested on a steep slope of land, with wooden pillars that supported its floorboards when the earth decided to curve down into a hill. We had all been in plastic chairs or in hammocks hung from the ceiling rafters, some of us sprawled out on the ground, and she had sat back in her chair, not really looking at any one of us, talking about her mom named Tammy who calls her a Jezebel on Sundays and something worse during the work week. She laughed, a sound that stuck in her throat as she searched for a sleeve to wipe her eyes. We prayed.

Every Saturday we took a boat into Nauta to buy groceries, wandered around the fish market, and spent seven soles at a dingy, little Internet café for an hour of Wi-Fi and a plate of chicken. And when we went last week, we had all been on a secret assignment to get party supplies for Tess's birthday. We managed to collect a pack of multi-colored balloons, a plastic princess crown, a piñata in the shape of a large champagne bottle, and Bubbalo bubble gum, Choco Disks, and small packs of Oreos that we could use to stuff it. Everyone met up at the Internet café at noon, and we got to talk to our families, all trying to respond to their questions about ministry the best we knew how. I sent messages about how much I liked my team, how well I had gotten to know them over the past few weeks, but that was all I could talk about. When the waitresses came and we were poured glasses of bitter tasting corn and melon juice, we ate like animals, tearing at the bones with our teeth while the party supplies remained concealed among our other groceries, cardboard trays of brown eggs and sacks of vegetables, boxes filled with loaves of bread, jars of strawberry jelly, more chunk than spread, cans of tuna, and bags of rice and beans. We were supposed to start traveling to the villages, really, that next week. That next week we would begin what we came there to do.

But today, yet again, the boat hadn't come. Stacy and Kyle had taken Tess into Nauta for her birthday, and the rest of us had sat cross-legged on the dock, waiting as we talked and listened to our watches sound out two hours in pitchy beeps before we climbed the hills back to our house and slipped off our muddy shoes just inside the kitchen in a giant, mismatched pile. We sat at the table together and someone pulled out leftover construction paper that we had been given by our ministry contacts so we could make a banner. We strung it up with white yarn, alternating yellow and orange paper triangles that bore each letter of her name. And then we blew up all the balloons we had and stuffed them in her bunk, the mosquito net suspending them in a cubic mass above her sleeping bag.

The boys had just finished hanging up the piñata, filled with all the candy we collected, when we saw Kyle, Stacy, and Tess's heads peak out from one of the hills, back from Nauta. As soon as Tess was close enough, we rushed to blindfold her with an old piece of cloth. We steered her toward the piñata, sagging on thin cords back near the changing corner. And then we all grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her, spun her, spun her until she was about to fall over. She reached out her arms, trying to steady herself, and she grazed the metallic green skin of the piñata.

We handed her one of the machetes that we kept beside our front step for the coconut-sized tarantulas that occasionally fell from our ceiling rafters like little black bombs targeting beds of rice on dinner plates. Tess gripped its rubber handle, and we all ran backwards before she could swing, watching her flail for a moment from our bed posts a safe distance away. Then the blade popped the bottle with a solid thump. The bottom fell out and the string broke and the bubble gum immediately began to melt onto our wooden floor the moment it hit and the two dogs rushed in and began licking

at it. Tess reached up to pull away the blindfold and it was all so strange, so so strange, because in that moment I hadn't known how we got there, how I got there, how I was laughing and shaking my head and watching candy melt in the jungle heat and celebrating this machete-wielding Whitney Houston. I hadn't signed up for this. I hadn't anticipated rainforest or perpetual upper lip sweat or living somewhere so far off the radar. I hadn't anticipated loving my teammates. I watched their faces watching Tess, and we were all so happy that she was there and that she was exactly who she was, and that she shook her fists each and every time she belted out the chorus of "I Will Always Love You" in her wavering voice. And she was my sister. And they're family, the siblings I never got to have, and whatever this world is, however round or sharp or dangerous, we were there facing it alongside one another, and maybe God was in the substance that held us together. For just one moment, my heart was all melted like Bubbalo.

Inside, I hand Stacy the phone, and she says that she'll try to get in touch with her boss, and she is able to almost immediately, telling me that my dad will try to call in an hour or so. They saved a plate of pasta for me, and I eat it sitting in between Tess and Miranda, feeling everyone watching me out of the corners of their eyes, casting wary glances my direction every so often. Nobody but Kyle and Stacy ever sits on that bench out in the field. I have the strange feeling that my name is still floating in the room, in between ears and maybe on tongues, probably spoken in the dinner prayer. Then Cassie and I do dishes while the others begin to rearrange our tables to play a game. She hands me plates after she's through scrubbing them with rainwater and a sponge that smells like moldy coffee grounds. I take each dish and dip it in another tub of rainwater mixed with bleach before drying it off with an old skirt that we use as a towel.

"Guys?" Tess's voice breaks through the scraping of tables against the wooden floor and the slower, steadier metallic raindrops beating against our roof. She's leaning up against a wall, staring down at the faces in her legs. And then she looks up with an open mouth hanging, like the words are just waiting to be pushed out from between her teeth if she can get over her stage fright. And she laughs another teary-eyed laugh. "Whenever I'd pictured my twenty-first birthday, I always assumed I would be blacked out by now."

The rain seems quieter all of a sudden, and everyone stops what they're doing to look at her. I stand there with a clean plate in my hand, letting it drip the lukewarm bleach water on my bare feet. Tess keeps talking, keeps saying that she had never pictured herself here. Never pictured herself with us. Never thought that she would turn legal in the jungle sober and with a machete. I looked at her, her face already thinner than when we first met three and a half weeks before, wearing the same white t-shirt that she had been wearing for the past three days. Greasy hair tied up in a bun on the very top of her head, bug bite scars covering her face. Just a few days ago, she thought she was dying because chiggers had burrowed themselves into her forehead. We all tried to tell her that she wasn't in danger, but the truth was that we had no idea. Our first week here, another girl had accidentally brushed against a tree and her arm skin burned off in long, red strips. Just from a tree. Nevermind the mosquitos that can bite through jeans, the tarantulas that strut across our ceiling rafters, or the flies that leave bleeding welts all across our legs. We had gathered around her and prayed for her forehead. She thanks us for that and for the champagne piñata. For always loving her these past three weeks. And suddenly, I understand that if God really is in whatever it is that's holding us together, then maybe that's our ministry here for the time being. Maybe it's in understanding that for Whitney Houston, grace looks like us handing her a machete to cut up a cardboard champagne bottle. It looks like conversations in jungle heat and having nothing to do but get to know each other. It looks like being here.

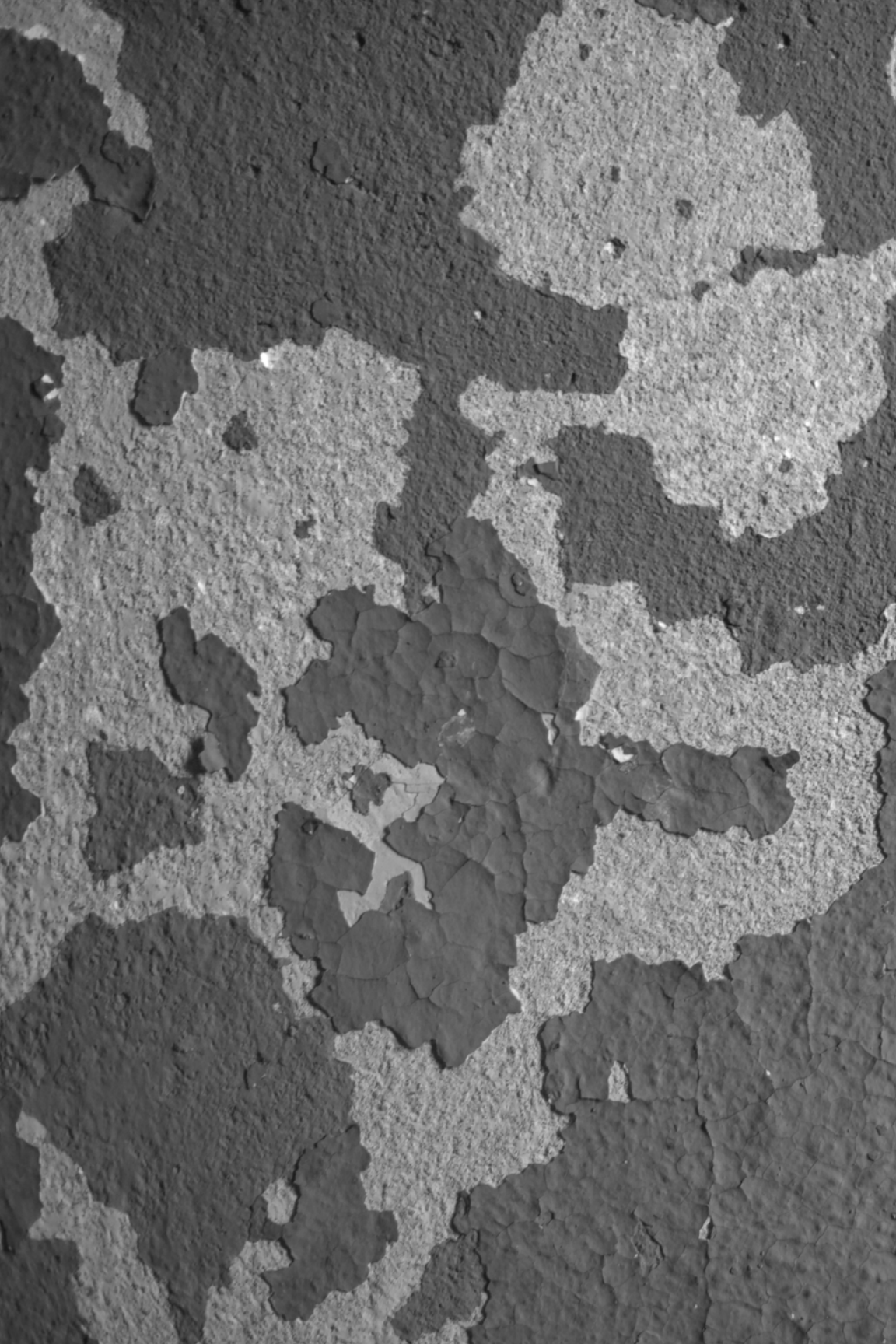
I go back outside when it stops raining, and my dad calls. I listen to his voice, hear

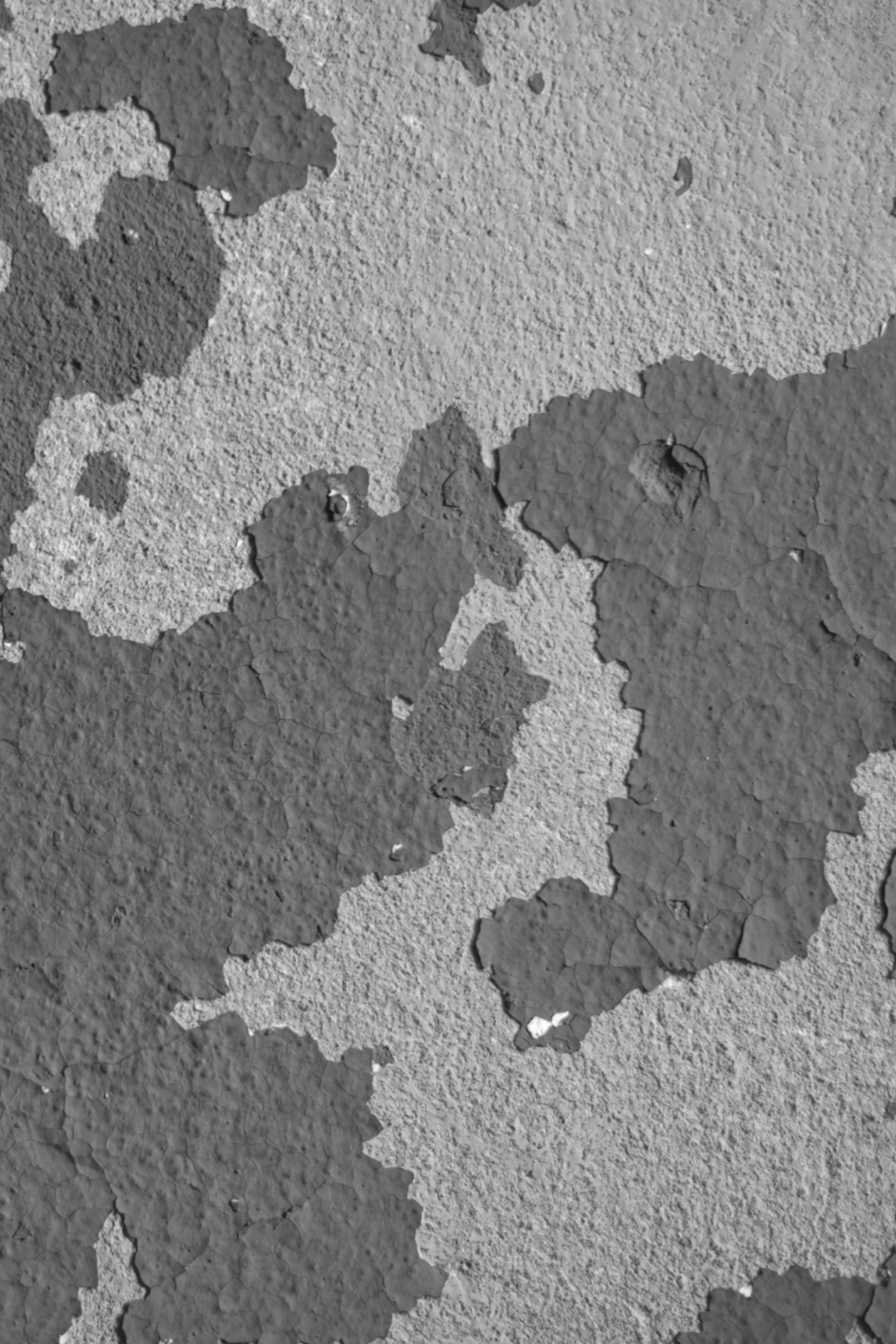
it from so many miles away, straining, probably from that old, brown recliner in the corner of our living room. *Grandmother, cancer, four weeks*. The stars are out, a dark, tattered curtain stretched across eternity. “You might want to consider coming home,” he says. The moon pulls at me like a tide.

Flashlights begin to lead feet from the house to the pavilion, and I move to a plastic chair alongside my teammates. Someone puts a small lantern in the middle of us all, and grasshoppers begin to crowd around it, worshipping. So we follow suit, Stacy with her guitar. She strums a little, stops, and looks at me, and I know that she knows, and I know that everybody knows that something has happened. And so I say words. And everyone gets closer. And everyone begins to pray. And I hear my name. And them calling my grandma by the names that they call their own grandmothers. And there are hands on me and my eyes are dry and open when theirs are shut because it’s all so strange, so so strange, getting news like this so far away from home, hearing my dad’s voice, doing math and trying to reconcile the time that the doctor says she has left with the five weeks I still have in the jungle. Someone says amen.

We continue to sing like that in the dark, and everyone moves back to where they were sitting originally. But it’s when I feel the words stuck in my throat that I realize someone is still touching me, hand on shoulder. Whitney Houston reaching out in the darkness. She keeps it there throughout the next song, and the next. And in between the words, for the first time, I can distinctly hear the slow and steady chant undergirding the buzz of mosquitos and the chirping, sharp sounds of insect legs rubbed together. And it’s *grace*. The word said over and over again in the darkness, whispered in the spaces between guitar strums when our own voices fall silent, *grace, grace, grace, grace*, there in the jungle, in greasy hair and melting bubble gum, in hands on shoulders and in not being alone. I look around at my teammates clothed in the black fabric of the night, some with the lantern casting dark veils over their faces, and I know without a doubt that if I woke up tomorrow and asked for a piñata, or a eulogy, they would get it for me, filling it up with all the love and Bubbaloos that they had.









A black and white photograph of vertical wooden planks. The planks are arranged vertically, with varying shades of gray and some white patches, possibly from peeling paint or weathering. In the center of the image, there is a white rectangular box with a thin black border. Inside this box, the word "STAFF" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

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A black and white photograph of a wooden chair, possibly a dining chair, with a white text box overlaid in the center. The chair's legs and seat are visible, and the background is a textured, light-colored wall. The text box contains the word "with" in a cursive font and "GRATITUDE" in a bold, sans-serif font.

*with*  
**GRATITUDE**

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## NOTES

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